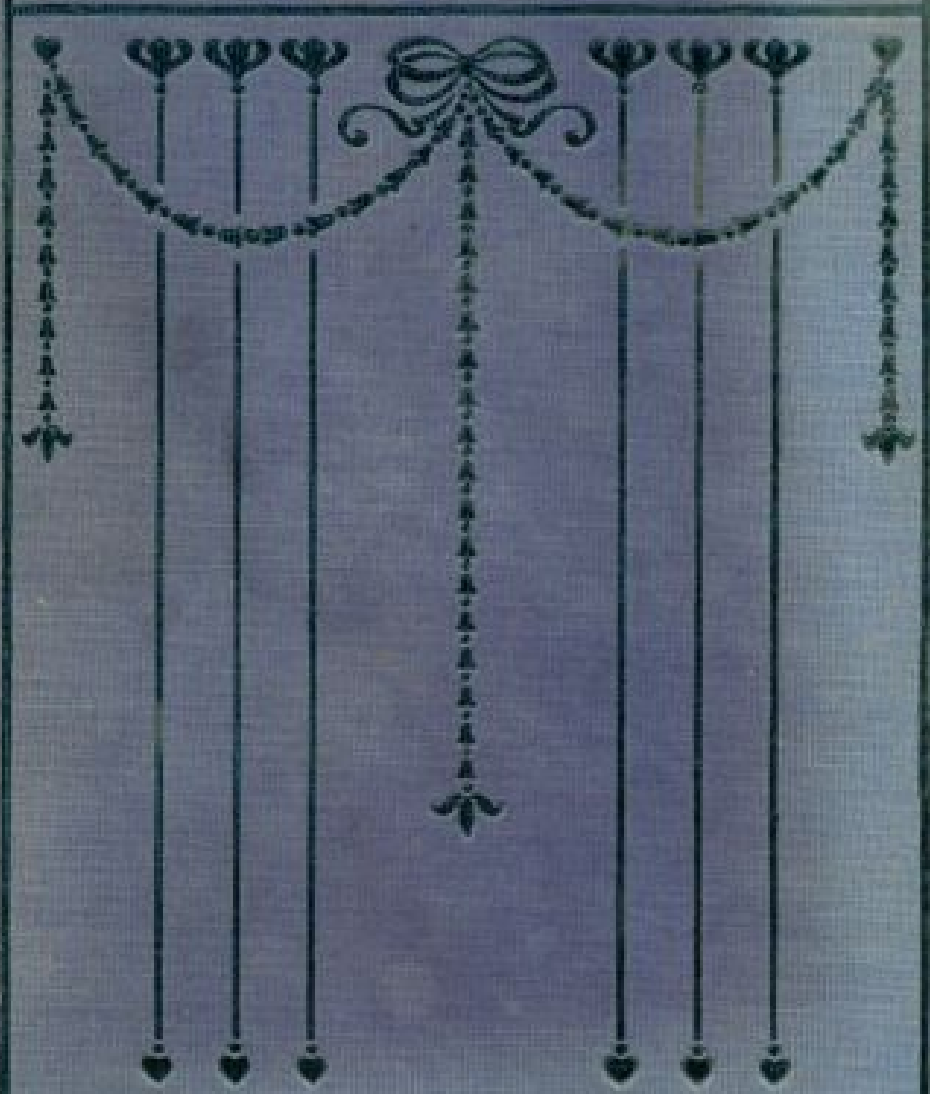
THE GENIAL RASCAL

R. ANDOM



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THE GENIAL RASCAL

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DEDICATED TO
ALL RASCALS WHO ARE SUFFICIENTLY
GENIAL

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THE GENIAL RASCAL.

CHAPTER I.

THE ESCAPE.

ON a barren moor, innocent of any habitation but a gloomy stone building, which looked a first-rate place to escape from, a man in prison garb was running as only such men can. With the broad arrow as a symbol of rapid flight, there is no costume so fitting for the purpose. Great occasions such as this make athletes of the poorest runners. Notwithstanding his advantages in the way of broad arrows and things, the fugitive was nearly done. He had run nearly ten miles, and now he stumbled over the uneven ground, breathing hard, with clenched teeth; but, still setting his face for the ends of the earth, he cursed the prison out of the back of his head, and ran on for liberty.

Richard Woodcock, or No. 49, had set out an hour before, with the ambitious design of making a fresh start in life. Warders five had followed in

pursuit; but Woodcock, having three hundred yards start, had dodged their bullets and increased his distance. One by one his pursuers had fallen exhausted on the moor until there was only one left, and this one Woodcock determined to outdo. Pausing on the edge of a little dry water-course, he looked back.

The sun was setting in a flaming sky. It seemed to be sinking slowly right into the gloomy prison that frowned at him from a distance of ten miles. Surely, once the great luminary was imprisoned there, the deepening twilight might favour Woodcock's escape. But for the present he must urge his jaded limbs forward, for there, stumbling along about half a mile behind him, was the warder who still pursued. Woodcock saw the barrel of his carbine glint in the sun as he watched him go down on his chest for about the fifth time in the last hour to send a bullet after him. There was a puff of smoke, and Woodcock laughed as the bullet sang wide.

Turning, he fled again. His object was to reach a dense clump of trees, covering about three acres, situated in an angle made by a sharp turn in the high road winding across the moor. There he thought he might elude his pursuer, or possibly waylay some bicyclist who had a suit of clothes on him at the time. He was willing to risk the possibility that the place had already been reached and occupied by warders with bicycles, who were now waiting for him.

He had set his mind on that clump of trees as offering a charming variety of possibilities. Once having entered it, he would become a mystery to his pursuer, who would not be able to tell whether he had hidden in it or beyond it. The manœuvre would perplex and harass him. He would have to search the thicket first; and while he was doing it, Woodcock, concealed in some hiding-place beyond, could rest till it was dark enough to shift his camp again.

So he stumbled and staggered on, with set face and labouring breath, to gain the thicket at all costs. When at last he reached it, he staggered in among the undergrowth and fell in a heap. There he lay for the space of nearly a minute, on the verge of utter exhaustion; but his heart was strong and his wind came back, though his limbs were numbed. As soon as he was able he staggered to his feet, and, holding by a tree trunk, looked back over his tracks. There was his pursuer, labouring along painfully, some five hundred yards away. There was little time—three minutes at the outside—between him and capture if he remained where he was, for it was obvious that of two exhausted

men, the one with the carbine would probably have the best of it.

Reeling and lurching, Woodcock made his way through the thicket, catching at the trunks and bushes here and there to steady himself. In this way he reached the other side, some fifty yards away, and found himself on a bank at the side of the road. There was a drop of five feet; he took it, sprawled in the dust, gathered himself up, and staggered across on to the open moor beyond. Here, about thirty paces from the road, he saw a patch of gorse which would afford him shelter. But he was done; his limbs seemed not his own. Could he reach that patch? He knew that if he did not he would be seen and taken. This gave him the strength of despair, and, like a drunken man, he reeled forward to within five yards of the place. There he fell, and, unable to rise, crawled and dragged himself into the prickly shelter.

Nearly half an hour passed by, and Woodcock neither heard nor saw a sign of the man who, he knew, was by this time searching the thicket. The sunset colours died out of the west and the twilight deepened. All was very silent on the vast moor; the faint sigh of the wind in the trees of the thicket across the road, and the occasional bursting of the gorse-pods near at hand, were all that he could hear. Woodcock sat up, and listened intently for the breaking of twigs in the copse, but heard only the cry of a landrail on the moor behind him. As he still listened the sound of a church bell in the distant village reached his ears. It tolled nine, and then rang the dulcet chimes of “Life let us cherish.”

“Exactly; that’s what I’m trying to do,” said Woodcock to himself, for he knew the air well; “but there’s a man with a carbine among those trees over there. I wish I could see or hear some sign of the beggar! I wish he was subject to fits or heart weakness, or something.”

He listened yet again, but this time all minor sounds gave way to the faint throbbing of a motor approaching from a distance. He was getting tired of the suspense. From his first survey of the ground he knew that he had only to run from one clump of gorse to another in order to get further from the road. The first was about twenty yards away to his left; and, as he was now rested, he resolved to make a dash for it, thinking that the approaching motor might take off the warder’s attention, should he be watching. Accordingly, he sprang out of the gorse and ran as fast as his stiff limbs would carry him. But he soon had certain evidence he had been seen. There was a shout from the thicket; he glanced over his shoulder, and saw the warder, with carbine levelled. He fell quickly on his face as a bullet whistled over him. In a moment he was up again and had gained the second patch of gorse. There he turned, and, looking out of his shelter, saw something that altered the whole position of affairs.

The warder, having fired his shot, jumped down the bank to cross the road, in hot pursuit of his quarry;

but the jump carried him forward into the middle of the road, and as he staggered there a moment the motor came round the curve at a rapid pace. There was a loud shout, the hooter sounded, and the motor swerved to clear him; but it was too late. He was caught by the splasher, and hurled violently back against the bank.

"He's killed, for a cert!" jubilated Woodcock; for, if it was so, what better sign could he have that Providence was on his side? He looked at the car, which contained a solitary occupant, and saw that it was slowing up. It stopped some fifty yards along the road; then a man alighted and ran back to the scene of the accident.

"Now's my chance," said Woodcock. "An empty car, and a good road before me! Am I downhearted? Have I forgotten the way to drive? No!" And he made for the car with all the speed of sharks and porpoises.

He reached it unobserved, for the driver was now bending over the prostrate warder some distance behind. Woodcock was about to jump in, when he spied a valise in the bottom of the car. The sight of it suggested clothes, and with the suggestion came the idea that he was an ass, and the foal of an ass, to think of going motoring in a prison outfit.

"Of course!" he said. "I should look well, shouldn't I? Clothes is all I want;" and with that he snatched the valise out of the car, and hurried off quickly into the shelter of the copse. But not so quickly that he did not note the white letters and figures, A H 1,007, in passing. He did not want the car; it was awkward and cumbersome. He was content to renounce it. But the number of the renunciation might prove valuable, he thought, and he hammered it into his memory.

With the valise as a seat, he waited just inside the thicket to see what would

happen. Presently he heard swift footsteps on the road; the motorist was making for his car.

"H'm!" muttered Woodcock. "He's running back for the brandy; he hasn't pinked him, then. Hello, though!" The car had jerked forward. "By glory, he's off! Can he be going for a doctor? No fear; he would have taken the man with him. He's pinked him, and now he's bunking like blazes, thinking there's no witness—the low-down, miserable skunk—bless his heart!"

His estimate was correct. The motorist was now flying into the distance with all the reckless haste that comes of blue funk, thinking that all he had left behind was an accidental piece of manslaughter, committed against a man who could now tell no tales. But he had left more than that. He had left Woodcock sitting on a valise nursing a piece of uncomfortable evidence, and making a plan of action in which the possibilities loomed large.

The first step in that plan, wherever it might lead him later, must necessarily be a change of clothes. In his haste to find out if the valise contained what he wanted, he wrenched the lock from its fastenings. Rapidly he turned over the contents. The thing held a dress-suit, a light overcoat and opera hat, a couple of clean shirts, a set of diamond studs, dress shoes, two pairs of socks, handkerchiefs, underclothing, a silk muffler, and white gloves.

Woodcock swore. Then his eyes fell upon a brush and comb and a pair of scissors, and finally upon a flask of brandy. At this he took back his swear words—swallowed them, and washed them down with a drop of the liquor.

"Well," he said, after a moment's thought, "of all the outfits in the world! This wicked man was evidently going to stay somewhere for a dance or a party—on his way up to town to the opera, maybe. But it really doesn't signify what fool tricks he was up to; here are the things, and I must put them on."

He smiled benignly as he unfolded the clothes; but the smile abated somewhat when he took up the dress shoes and looked at them critically.

"You seventeen-and-sixpenny blighters!" he said. "You're the weak spot in the whole outrig. How can I walk half a dozen miles in you? Well, here goes. Clothes make the man in a case of this kind. I hope to goodness they fit!"

With this he set to work to make the necessary change. Remembering a small pool of water that he had seen in the copse on his first hurried passage through it, he sought it out and washed his hands very carefully, so as not to soil the clean shirt he was about to put on. Then he returned, and, having dried them with one of the handkerchiefs from the valise, he proceeded to "dress for dinner," as he mentally phrased it.

CHAPTER II.

LIGHTNING CHANGES.

WOODCOCK was slightly made, and he congratulated himself upon the fact, for he realised that if he was bigger in the neck and shoulders than the man in the motor the lightning change was off. A collar or a coat several sizes too small was hopeless, but a size too big would not matter much.

In great suspense he took up one of the collars and deciphered the size.

"Hooray!" he chuckled. "I have got a neck to think of sailing out in dress-clothes; but it's the right-sized neck—within a tailor's curse of it, anyhow; sixteen and a half—half a size to spare. That doesn't signify. Perhaps I've gained that in three years."

Rapidly he stripped himself and struggled into silk vest, pants, and socks, white shirt, and collar. In manipulating the studs for the latter articles he paused to look at the brilliant diamond contained in the one that went into the shirt front. He knew a good deal about stones; not because he had just emerged from three years' experience of them in durance vile, but because he had once been a moneylender's clerk.

He held the brilliant up and looked at it.

"H'm!" he said. "By this light it's worth a hundred quid. Here's money for you, Woodcock, if you can only dispose of the article!"

In another ten minutes he was completely dressed. The clothes were a little large in some places and small in others; but there, as Woodcock remarked when he noticed the inequalities, "What sort of symmetry can you expect of a man who will run down his fellow-men and then bolt like blazes?" But the most patent signs that the clothes had not been made for him were smoothed over by the silk-lined overcoat and the muffler, to say nothing of the opera hat, which fitted him like a halo, and the shoes, in which he felt he could dance jigs on the moor. But what pleased him most was the sudden discovery of a watch and chain, and a sovereign-purse containing three pounds ten shillings. It was a gold mine in a waistcoat pocket. He annexed these, and also the brandy flask, in case it might prove useful. Then, leaving the valise practically empty except for a pair of socks and a few odds and ends, he started off to interview the warder, to see what he had to say for himself, if anything.

“He’s very quiet,” he said, as he leapt down the bank and made his way along the roadside to the spot where the warder lay; “very quiet. I don’t believe he could tell a very plausible tale on that motor chap. But I can.”

And it seemed, when he reached the figure of the warder huddled in a heap on the side of the road, that his opinion of that individual’s abilities was fairly correct, for when he straightened him out the fellow lay like a log. But on closer inspection he found there was a slight flutter of the heart. The warder still lived. The motorist had evidently left him for dead, but he had made a mistake.

“What ho!” said Woodcock, feeling him all over. “I’m hanged if I can find any broken bones or blood or anything. He’s been knocked silly, that’s all. I wonder if a change of clothes would do him any good? It might; you never know. It’s got to be done, anyhow. When they find him in my clothes they will naturally look for me in his clothes, and that’ll put them clean off the scent. I’m dressed for company, I am.”

It was obvious that Woodcock’s peculiar method of resuscitation by a change of raiment could not be carried out on the roadside, where any passer-by might oversee his operations. Accordingly he shouldered the limp body and lumped it on to the top of the bank; then he vaulted up after it, and dragged it in among the trees. There he left it while he ran back to the spot where he had deposited the valise and his prison clothes. Intent on transforming the warder into the similitude of a gaol-bird, he selected the pair of scissors and the comb from among the few odds and ends left in the valise, and, with these shearing implements and his discarded prison outfit, he hurried back.

It was no easy task to undress the unconscious warder, but by dint of pushing and pulling and some rough handling he at last succeeded in getting his clothes off. The work of redressing him in the prison clothes was no less difficult, but he laboured with a will, and at last the thing was accomplished to his satisfaction. The things fitted fairly well, and as Woodcock surveyed the effect in the dim light he said it would do—at least, as far as the clothes and boots were concerned. But the man had a heavy moustache, and too much hair on his head. That would not do. Consequently the scissors came into use, and the moustache was speedily removed as close to the skin as possible. With the help of the comb he cropped the warder’s hair close, stood off to survey him with arms akimbo, then, as an afterthought, placed his own cap upon his head and called him No. 49.

During these proceedings the warder had groaned once or twice, and it seemed that Woodcock’s manipulations had almost restored him to consciousness. Now, as Woodcock stood surveying him, he wondered vaguely what he would say or do if he could regain his senses. The situation struck him

as comical. Failing to recognize No. 49 in the kind gentleman in the dress clothes and the top-hat, the warder would not be able to blame any one who for the moment recognised an escaped convict in himself. Woodcock chuckled at the thought of the topsy-turvy situation that would ensue.

"Love a duck!" he said. "I'll do it! He's quite helpless. I'll hide away his carbine and his clothes, and then we'll have some fun."

He collected these articles, and concealed them carefully in the thickest part of the underscrub some distance away. This done, he poured some brandy from the flask between the warder's lips and watched the effect.

The man stirred, and muttered something.

"Have another," said Woodcock, pouring a fresh dose down his throat.

This time the warder, revived by the strong stimulant, sat up and looked about him, like a man awaking from sleep. He was of a dogged cast of countenance, with bristling eyebrows and a square jaw.

"Where am I?" he said to himself, in a dazed way, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

Then, catching sight of the elegantly-dressed figure with the genial expression standing over him, he asked again, pathetically:

"Can you tell me where I am, sir, and what has happened to me?"

"You're on the moor," replied Woodcock, with an aristocratic drawl, "and you've been—ah—bashed by a passing motor. Don't you remember it?"

"No, I can't say I do. I feel a bit shaken, but I can remember nothing."

A sudden idea came to Woodcock.

"What's your name?" he asked, quickly.

The warder shook his head hopelessly.

"My name," he said, slowly—"my name—my name—— I—I don't know; I've forgotten it."

He passed his hand over his brow, and shook his head again.

Woodcock then gripped the position like lightning.

"Ah," he said, "I know your number, but—ah—your name seems to have been knocked——"

"My number?" interrupted the warder. "What number?"

"Good Lord! Have you forgotten that, too? Well, there——"

"I can't remember any number, sir."

Woodcock now began to warm up to it.

"Look here, my man," he said, firmly, but gently, "I don't know what you are playing at, but you seem to have forgotten that you've just escaped from prison, and that your number's on your clothes as large as life—No. 49. Get up and shake yourself together; then, perhaps, you'll recall things better."

The warder, who was clearly suffering from a lapse of memory, resulting from his accident, looked down at his prison clothes and swore. He had not forgotten the gift of language.

"Steady!" said Woodcock. "I belong to the Church and the Band of Hope. Get up and pull yourself together, I tell you, and don't give way to that fourth-rate criminal language."

With this he helped the warder to his feet and steadied him.

"Now, then," he said, "are there any bones broken?"

"No; I feel stiff and sore, that's all. The only thing that worries me is that I know what I'm talking about, but I can't remember who I am and where I come from. No, not a thing!"

"Can you remember running into the car in your anxiety to escape?" asked Woodcock, solicitously.

"No. Did you see it?"

"Yes; I was in the car with another. I stayed to bring you round. My friend's coming back with a doctor in an hour's time; but if you're wise you won't wait. Don't you even recall tussling with the warder, and shooting him with his own carbine?"

The man's face grew long and he stood speechless.

"Why," went on Woodcock, rubbing it in, "it was just after the shot that you dashed out into the middle of the road and ran bang into us."

The warder began to look as if he hoped he hadn't damaged the car.

“Oh, heavens!” he said. “I’ve escaped from prison, killed a warder, and—is there anything else?”

“Not that I know of,” returned Woodcock. “But that’s about enough, isn’t it?”

The warder looked terrified. He glanced round as if meditating a sudden dash for the open; then his eyes fell upon his prison clothes, and he shook his head in despair.

Hard lines! Hard lines to be knocked down a warder and to spring up a convict in prison clothes, and not to be able to contradict it! But to the real convict, who stood looking at him with suppressed amusement, the position was too good to be yielded up to any feeling of commiseration for the warder. The real sap of it was to come, and Woodcock closed one eye with a twinkle as he mentally drafted out the trickiest bit of fun that had come his way for a long time.

“Are you going to give me up?” said the warder at last? raising his eyes from his prison garb to his benefactor’s face.

“No,” returned Woodcock, with a magnanimous air; “I don’t want to get a man hanged for what he can’t remember. It doesn’t seem just. Besides, we nearly killed you; and on account of that I’ll give you a chance to get off. Yes, I’m running a risk, I know—a bigger risk than you think; but I mean what I say. I’ll help you.”

The warder expressed his gratitude in terms of deep emotion, and finally inquired what the proffered chance consisted of.

“Listen,” returned Woodcock. “In those prison clothes you have absolutely no chance of getting away; but look here. What do you say to the warder’s clothes, eh?”

“Ha! A good idea! Yes, yes; quick! I might get off in those.”

“You’ll stand a very good chance, anyhow. I s’pose that’s why you shot him, if the truth were known. You wait here, and I’ll go and strip the corpse. Then, while you’re putting on the warder’s clothes, I’ll dress the body in your prison togs. See?”

“Capital! Then we’ll throw it into a deep hole, and by the time it’s found it will be so disfigured that they’ll think it’s me, and so give up the chase. Isn’t that what you mean, sir?”

“That’s it, exactly. But when you say ‘we’ you make a mistake. You don’t suppose I’m going to let you touch that body? With me it doesn’t matter; no one would suspect me. Why, man, you’ve made an awful mess of him! Not satisfied with shooting him through the heart, you must needs use the butt of the carbine, and—well, as I said, you’ve made an awful mess of him. You’re

not going to handle him. No fear! When I go out of my way to help an unfortunate fellow-mortal, I do it properly. You leave that corpus to me. It's lucky for you that you've forgotten what it's like. Now, stay here, and I'll get his clothes."

With this Woodcock darted off to the place where he had hidden the clothes, and, after waiting a reasonable time, during which he carefully disposed of all the warder's cartridges, and satisfied himself that the carbine was empty, he returned with the whole outfit.

"Now, quick!" he said. "Off with those things, and while you're putting on these I'll dress the body again and dispose of it. See? At present he's lying without a stitch on him."

"Right you are, sir," replied the warder, divesting himself of his prison clothes with a will, for he realised that now he had some hope of liberty.

As soon as the warder had taken everything off except his skin, Woodcock hurried away with the things, leaving him to don his own clothes, and to find out how exactly they fitted him.

Having selected a heavy log some distance away, he wasted a little time, and then dragged it with some noise to an old and clumsily boarded-up well he had noticed in the vicinity. There he removed two of the boards and pushed the log in.

The noise of a deep splash came up. Woodcock then threw his prison clothes down after the log, replaced the boards, and hurried back, to find the warder dressed and lacing up his boots.

"It's all done," he said. "I rigged up the body in your clothes, and threw it down a well over there. Did you hear the splash?"

"I did that, and mighty glad of it. You're very good to me in this way, sir. I shall never be able to repay you."

"Not a bit of it. You see, we ran you down, and as you're not in a position to give us in charge, I'm trying to make amends. How do the clothes fit?"

"They might have been made for me."

Woodcock laughed in the motorist's sleeve.

"And the boots?" he asked, steadying his voice.

"Exact fit, and quite easy. It's something to know I killed a man of my own size."

"Yes; but that won't save your neck, will it?"

"No, I don't suppose it will." Then, with a puzzled air, "I can't find any bullet-hole in the coat, sir."

"It wasn't necessary," replied Woodcock, quickly. "Shot through the head,

with infernal accuracy. Now, look here. Do you feel equal to going back to the prison and saying that you can't find No. 49 anywhere?"

"Scarcely, sir."

"I see. You don't feel bright this evening, and you don't particularly care about the prison people. The food isn't good, and so forth. I see. Well, the best thing you can do is to drift away over the moor, and pretend to be searching for No. 49. Put on a bold front, and always let 'em think that you're hot on the track of the fugitive. It's your only chance. I'm inclined to think that by pursuing yourself in that way you might get clear off. And then I should advise you to take ship to some fresh country and start a new life, and make a fortune and get married and settle down. You see, you've clean forgotten who you are and the terrible things you've done, so that you won't be suffering any pangs of remorse. And, as far as that goes, when you begin your new life, you know, and leave your dreadful past behind, you can look back on me as a first-class liar if you like; perhaps it would be better so. Believe you never really killed the warder. The thing I dressed up and threw down the well was merely a log, and——"

"And these clothes and this carbine?" remarked the warder, with a weary smile.

"Ah, well, they're a mystery, and it doesn't do to look too closely into things of that kind. Anyhow, you've had your slate wiped clean, and if you can only evade or forget the point as to how those clothes got here, you'll be like a man with a clean conscience. Mind you, if it wasn't for that, and the hope that you'll be able to lead a better life in some new country and redeem yourself, I should feel it my duty to give you up to justice. In fact, I'm not so sure that"——

"Oh, don't do that, sir," cried the warder, as if he felt the ground trembling beneath his feet—"don't do that! Give me a fresh start, sir, and I'll lead a different life. I will, really, sir. I'll make for the coast and work my passage to America, and there I'll atone for my past life of crime."

During this speech he fell on his knees, and, grasping Woodcock's hand, almost wept upon it.

"Enough!" said Woodcock, deeply touched. "I will shield you. Now be off, before I change my mind, and take care you never fall into the hands of the law again."

He led the warder to the bank and pointed to the moor beyond. The man thanked him for all his kindness, and then, jumping down, made off.

"Well!" said Woodcock, when he had gone. "Well!"—and he drew a long breath—"that's about the rummiest go that ever came my way! He'll chase

himself to the coast, for a cert, and get out of the country. I wonder what he'll think of it all if his memory ever comes back."

But this wonder was obliterated from Woodcock's mind by the picture of an innocent warder, disguised in his own clothes, and fleeing from justice, like a prison convict. It was too funny for words, and he sat down on the bank and laughed till he cried. Then, in feeling for a handkerchief in the breast-pocket of the overcoat he was wearing, his fingers came in contact with a letter. He withdrew it, forgetting all about the handkerchief. The scene was changed. It was a letter, but there was no envelope; consequently, the address of the person it was written to was missing. But the address of the person who wrote it was there, and that was something.

"Perhaps," chuckled Woodcock to himself—"perhaps this will prove interesting. At all events, I've got the address of some one who knows that motorist. I'll soon see what else I've got when the moon rises, and that won't be long."

CHAPTER III.

A LETTER AND A PLAN.

THE full moon rose, and found Woodcock about a mile along the road to the nearest village. As the light flooded over the moor he paused with the letter in his hand, and sat down on the mossy bank by the side of the road. He had made several attempts to puzzle the thing out, but without success. Now, however, the light he had been waiting for had arrived, and, holding the letter up, he read it through.

A delicate feminine hand, covering two sheets of notepaper, above the signature of Valentine, gave the writer's feelings away at the very outset with "My dear, darling Jack."

Woodcock merely laughed at this—not bitterly, but sympathetically, for nothing short of steam-rollers could have crushed the easy-going geniality out of him—and read on. As he slowly mastered the contents he began to raise his eyebrows. It appeared that the old man (her guardian) had gone to Brindisi to meet a horrid fellow named Armstrong. She had never seen him, neither had her guardian; but she felt he was horrid from the fact that the old fossil wanted her to marry the brute for no other reason than that he was the son of the said fossil's brother officer. He was on his way from India to England now in the 'Calcutta,' and she implored her dear, darling Jack to come quickly, before the wretch arrived.

Woodcock paused in his reading, and remarked, "Armstrong—Armstrong! That's a name I don't like. Why, it was an Armstrong who got me—— Well,

that's all past now. But she's right. Any one named Armstrong must necessarily be a blighter. To proceed."

The letter then went on to say that darling Jack's plan was a capital one. He could come down in his motor, and though she couldn't marry him until she obtained her guardian's consent, as that would mean trouble, still, they could have a good time until the old fossil came back in a fortnight's time with the horrid fellow above named. He (Jack) could put up at an hotel in Avington, as it wouldn't be quite the thing for him to stay in the house during her guardian's absence; but they could go to the opera and for long motor rides, and enjoy themselves generally. Oh, it would be fun!

"No doubt it would," said Woodcock, "and I don't want to stand in the way of innocent enjoyment; but I'm afraid it won't be safe for darling Jack now that he's killed a man! I'm afraid he'll have to lie low. But come on; let's know the worst." And he turned his attention to the remainder of the letter.

It ended with protestations of undying love and many promises that if her guardian would not consent to their marriage she would remain single to her dying day, if she lived to be a hundred—that was all.

"H'm!" mused Woodcock, as he folded her letter up and placed his forefinger on his thumb in the spirit of recapitulation. "So the old boy's gone to Brindisi to meet a son of a brother officer, and won't be back for a fortnight. H'm! Meantime there appears to be nobody in charge over Valentine—no dragon of an aunt or elder sister, or anything of that kind. H'm! And Jack has come all the way from Scarborough to have a good time with her while the old fossil's away, and will probably put up at an hotel in Avington, about five miles over there." He could see the lights of the small town across the moor. "Well, that's all very interesting for Valentine and Jack, but the point is this: Has Jack got any money? The letter would have pleased me better if she had turned up her nose at Jack as a millionaire. He must have a bit if he's got a motor, and—er—used to have a diamond stud worth a hundred quid; but he can't have as much as the horrid fellow, or the old fossil wouldn't be so dead shook on the latter gentleman, brother officer's son or no brother officer's son. Well, as he and I are the only two people living who saw the accident, it might be to his advantage to hire me to help him keep it secret. I'm the only man who can help darling Jack in that matter and shield him from the police; and if I do that I reckon it's worth five hundred pounds—by this light.

"Now then, Jack," he added, as he quickened his footsteps, "I'm on your blood-trail instanter while you're in a red-hot funk!"

But as he went he began to realise that he was hedged in with nine hundred and ninety-nine and one difficulties; for all he knew, there might even be a thousand and one—the regulation number. Only those who have escaped from

gaol are fully aware what difficulties beset their every step, and not every one has been so fortunate.

To begin with, supposing a warder suddenly sprang up in front of him and wanted to know what he was doing there at that time of night in dress-clothes and thin shoes, what would he say? He didn't quite know, although he was not usually at a loss for words.

Again, how was he to approach darling Jack in darling Jack's own dress-clothes? Indeed, how was he to put his nose inside the hotel at all? The nose would most probably be recognised by someone. Besides, he was close-cropped. True, he had escaped, as it were, from the barber's scissors with an eighth of an inch growth, but still he knew he would feel a draught the moment he removed his hat in company. Given a wig, he might pull through; but there were no wigs growing on the moor at that time of year.

"Tare and hounds!" he said. "As darling Jack was going out somewhere, why on earth couldn't he have been going to a fancy-dress ball? Then I should have had a decent disguise of some kind. But there you are. These things never happen right except in story books, where the man who is telling the yarn can put what he likes into the valises and straighten things out nicely. No such luck for me. The only reasonable thing is this sovereign-case. I shall have to go straight up to London, and lie a-bed in some hotel till six o'clock to-morrow night before I can go out in these togs and pop the diamond and get a fresh rig-out. It's no good my breaking into some general clothing store. I might as well break into the gaol again. It's too bloomin' risky. No, there's nothing for it but London—if I can get safely into the train at Avington."

So, with slightly altered plans, he hastened on; but when he rounded a sharp turn in the road he halted suddenly, for a new factor confronted him. There, in the middle of the highway, stood a motor-car, while a man was lying on his back in the dust playing with the works. It was evident the machine had broken down; and as no other motor had passed since the accident, it struck Woodcock all of a heap that the man on his back in the dust was none other than darling Jack himself!

Here was a providential chance, then! Should he take the bull by the horns and boldly interview the man in his own clothes? Why not? If the worst came to the worst, Woodcock could tell him something more exciting than the origin of clothes.

Accordingly, with a grin running all through him, Woodcock went forward. As he neared the machine the white legend A H 1,007 stood out clear, and he knew that he had found his man.

"Hi!" he said, pausing abreast of the car. "Hi! A H 1,007, come forth!"

“What’s the matter?” cried a voice from beneath the car.

“Here, there’s thunder and lightning to pay for! Come out; I want to speak to you.”

CHAPTER IV.

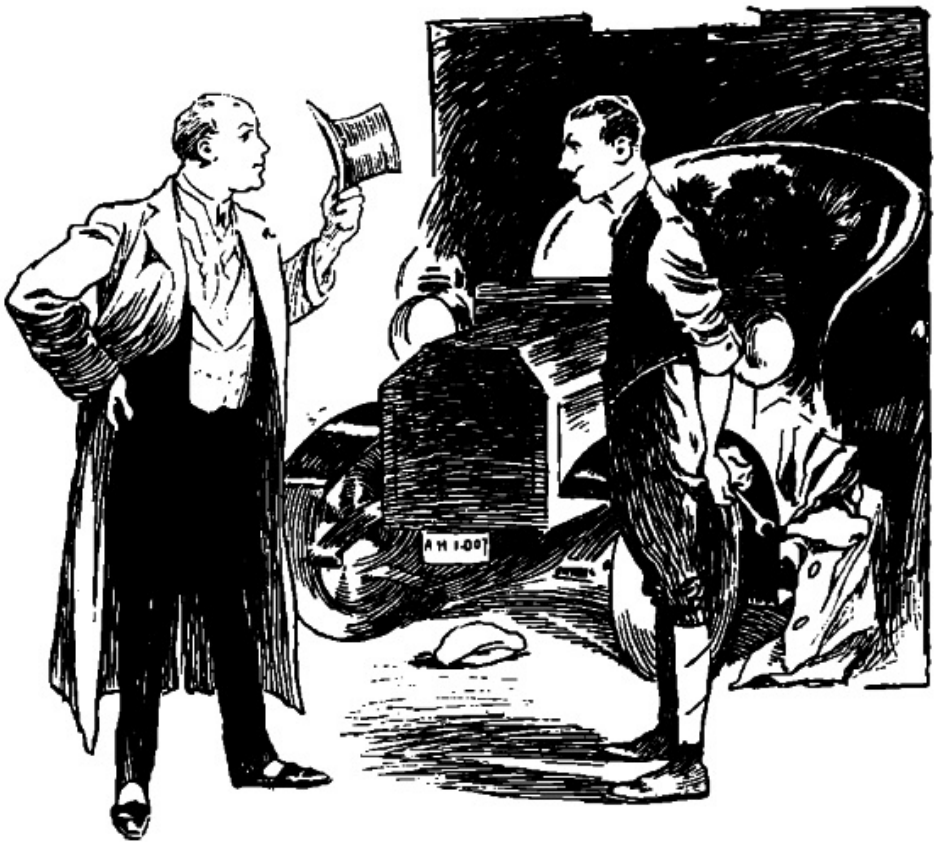
A FOOL AND HIS MOTOR-CAR.

THE motorist crawled out, and scrambling to his feet, faced Woodcock with a very pale countenance, which showed some relief on finding that the voice had not come from the lungs of the law. Hardwicke, or "darling Jack," as Valentine had called him, was rather a weak-kneed poetical-looking fellow, and Woodcock summed him up in the pale moonlight as easy business.

"Good evening," he said, airily. "Ah—I noticed your number, and I thought you'd like to know what's happened."

"What do you mean?" asked Hardwicke, trying to appear at ease.

"I'll tell you," returned Woodcock. "I called at the gaol on my way to a dance in town, and picked up the Governor, who is a friend of mine, to bring him along in my motor. Well, we were rounding the bend by the thicket, when we heard a groan from the roadside. I pulled up. We then ran to the spot where we had heard the groan, and found one of the prison warders knocked all of a heap. He was apparently in a dying condition, and all he could say was 'A H 1,007.' We gathered him up, and as we were placing him in the car he expired. The Governor's returning with the body to the gaol first, and then he's following up to overtake me."



During this Hardwicke's face had gradually fallen to zero, yet for a moment he looked as if he was about to deny any knowledge of the affair. Woodcock saw it, and came to his assistance.

"By the way," he said, "we picked up a valise on the road near by; it had evidently fallen out of your car. The Governor took it back to the gaol with him. Now it remains to consider what's the best thing to be done."

Hardwicke now saw there was no hope. It flashed through his mind that there was a letter in that valise which would give him away. In his flurried state he had gleaned no suspicion that the letter was not more than a couple of yards away from him, in the breast-pocket of his own overcoat. He knew only what Woodcock had told him—that he had killed a warder, and that the number of his car was known.

"What's to be done?" he asked in a state of total suspension of intellect. "I—I've good reasons—quite innocent reasons—for not having my presence here known. That is, I mean I wanted to remain incog."

So did Woodcock, but he didn't say so. All he said was, "Well, if you had

reasons before, you have more of them now, and a shade less innocent too. Of course, it's impossible for you to remain incog. now, unless—unless with, say, five miles' start of my car, which will be here in ten minutes, you might——" He paused, and looked at the derelict car as if to ask what was wrong with it.

Hardwicke seemed to see in the words and the look a tentative offer of help, and jumped at it.

"You mean I might get off?" he asked, eagerly. "But you—will you——"

"I don't want to see you get into trouble," broke in Woodcock, magnanimously. "I've got a motor myself, and I know accidents will happen. I daresay it was the man's own fault."

"It was—indeed it was. He ran right into me."

"Of course. But, you know, the police will wonder why, when you set off like mad to fetch a doctor, you didn't take him with you in the car. Ahem!"

Woodcock had put it so nicely that Hardwicke tried to look as if he had really been going for a doctor, but he only succeeded in looking very worried.

"Well, anyhow," went on Woodcock, "I'm willing to help you in the matter; but, look here, were your name and address in that valise? Because, if it was, you may as well face the matter out."

Hardwicke thought for a moment.

"No," he said at last, with great relief. "There was a letter without an envelope. It contained only the name and address of the writer."

"Ah, then you're all right," returned Woodcock; and with that, as it didn't suit his book to consider the question of detectives and washing-marks on the pair of socks he had left behind, he changed the subject quickly.

"Now, what's the matter with the car?"

"Three minutes will put it right. I've just discovered what's wrong." Hardwicke spoke excitedly, and in order to make Woodcock's offer good by his speedy acceptance, he scrambled back under the car and resumed his tinkering.

Woodcock now let his genial grin loose. He faced the moon, and silent laughter suffused his whole being. It gave birth to an impulse to jockey the man under the car—an impulse which, if it took him back to gaol, he could not resist.

"Hurry up!" he cried. "I fancy I can hear my car coming."

A grunt that was half a groan came from the dust as Hardwicke struggled with the nuts—minus the wine.

"Make haste!" went on Woodcock, rubbing it in. "If it's my car, it'll be here in three minutes."

Another grunt and the screeling of a nut came in answer from the dust, and Hardwicke kicked his toes rapidly on the road in hysterical haste.

"Run back," he cried—"run back and delay them! I shall be quite three minutes."

"H'm!" said Woodcock, meditatively, to himself. "He's not such a fool as I thought. I must dissemble."

"It's all right," he called out. "They've turned down a side road."

There was no side road, but that didn't signify as there was no car either.

Presently Hardwicke emerged and dusted himself down.

"It's all right now," he said. "It usually takes half an hour to find it, but five minutes does the trick when it's found."

He seemed to have collected his wits a little. Woodcock noticed this, and for a moment wondered whether it would be advisable to stick to him any longer. But he soon cast away the hesitation, for when he came to think of it, he had a good lot to say to Hardwicke before he had done with him.

"Are you all ready?" he asked. "I think I'll go with you, and not wait for the Governor. Besides, now that I've started on it, I may as well see you through."

"It's awfully good of you," returned Hardwicke, warmly.

"Not at all, not at all. We may be able to consider some points as we go along."

With this he followed Hardwicke into the car, and in another moment they were spinning along the road.

"Now," said Woodcock, when they were well under way, "you say there was a letter in that valise with the name and address of the writer. Was there anything in the letter to lead the police to suppose that you might go to that address?"

"Yes, everything. In fact, that address, as they will see from the letter, is my destination—at least, either that or a certain hotel in Avington."

"Then you must keep away from both places."

"Yes, confound it all! That's just what I don't want to do. You see, the letter was from a very dear friend who is expecting me."

"Oh, I see. Well, it seems to me that the only thing you can do is to hide somewhere in the vicinity for a week, at least, until the hue and cry has died down, and only see him on the quiet."

"It's a 'she,' " corrected Hardwicke.

"Oh, an affair of the heart, eh? Well, that makes me more willing than ever to help you. H'm! But it's difficult. You see, in less than half an hour there will

be police all round the house waiting for you. You daren't go near the place. But if you like, I'll—— Hark!"

The hoot of a machine was heard in the distance behind them. Hardwicke became terrified. Woodcock looked surprised. He knew it was not his motor; that was a myth. But he wondered whether it was someone looking for No. 49, or at least carrying to Avington the intelligence of his escape. No, that was hardly likely. They would do that by telephone. It was some unoffending car—one that was neither here nor there. But the thought of the telephone made him pause.

"Put on pace!" he said. "That's my car, with the Governor of the gaol. He drives like the devil; we mustn't let him overtake us. And remember this: the news of the accident has, without doubt, been telephoned from the gaol to Avington, and the police there will be on the look out for this car. Couldn't we go a roundabout way?"

"Yes; there's a lane turning down on the left, and leading about five miles round to where I want to go."

"All right. We'll take that, but you must hurry up. My car's a flier, especially with the Governor in it."

Hardwicke put on all the speed he knew; but however fast he urged the car, Woodcock kept spurring him on, saying he could see the lights of the car behind getting nearer and nearer.

At length, about a mile and a half outside Avington, they reached the lane and turned down it. Here the way wound in and out between high hedges, and as Woodcock cautioned Hardwicke against using the hooter, lest the following car should hear it, they had of necessity to slow down a little. But they met nothing in the lane, and presently emerged into a broader road, along which they pursued their course at a rapid rate.

"They're bound to make straight for the address in the letter," said Woodcock, as Hardwicke bent over the wheel. "I should advise you to hide near that address. The girl may be able to come to you, but you won't be able to go near the house. Is it anywhere near those disused quarries there, all overgrown with scrub?"

"Yes; not a quarter of a mile away."

"Well, there are some good hiding-places there, I should think. What do you say? I'll take a message to the girl for you."

Hardwicke was silent for some moments.

"Decide quickly," said Woodcock. "There's no time to waste. The road passes near the quarry. It may be a case of running for it, you know."

"Yes; but what's to become of the car?"

“Ah, that’s the rub! I’m afraid I’m letting myself in for something over this business.”

Hardwicke had his mental pockets full of apologies and thanks, and whenever Woodcock bewailed the turn events were taking he rolled them out generously. On this occasion, Woodcock cut him short with “Don’t be afraid; I shan’t go back on it. I’ll see you through. It’s not so bad as I thought. I have to be in London to-morrow anyhow, so I may as well go to-night and take your car along with me. It’ll be easy to store it there for a week or so without any risks.”

“Will you do that for me?” asked Hardwicke.

“Certainly I will. Now, what about the message to the girl? To begin with, what is the name and address?”

“Miss Valentine Woods, The Grange. I’ll point out the house presently. And I want you to tell her that—well, I don’t know what. You see, there’s no time to think of anything, and we’re nearly there.”

“Yes; and you may depend the Governor of the gaol in my motor is nearly there, too, since he’s coming the shorter way. Leave the tale to me and pile on the speed.”

Hardwicke made no reply, but the car increased its pace. They were now on the high road leading into Avington from the south. Having made short work of this for half a mile, they suddenly sighted the lights of a car coming out of the town towards them.

“There’s my car!” cried Woodcock, who could not have explained easily how he recognised it at a distance of nearly a mile. He seemed to see this himself, for he added, “Yes, it must be.”

“We’re before them,” returned Hardwicke. “Here’s the lane that leads to the Grange. They’ll see our lights turn in, but we’re well in front.”

As he spoke he turned off on to a side road that led away from the town again. As they sped along this, Hardwicke pointed to a bank of trees some half-mile away.

“There’s the Grange,” he said, “and there, beneath the cliff on the side of the hill to the right, are the old quarries.”

“I see. Yes,” returned Woodcock, “they’ll never find you there. But, say, is this a blind road?”

“No; it leads right through to the highway.”

“Thank goodness! Now quick; we haven’t much time. You wait in the quarries till I come. I’ll whistle—let me see—‘Life let us cherish,’ and then you must find me. I’ll bring everything you want, so, for Heaven’s sake, don’t

venture out of your hiding-place! It's better to stay there a week in this warm weather than to get two years for manslaughter. So lie very low."

By this time they were passing the Grange gates, and Hardwicke looked longingly at the house, which lay some distance back from the road. It was hard lines that he could not go in, and Woodcock felt genuinely sorry for him, more especially as there was really no earthly reason that he knew of why he should stay out in the quarries.

"Now," he said, when they came opposite the dark cliff that Hardwicke had pointed out, "pull up, and pop off before they get round the corner. Quick, quick! You've got a good hundred yards' run; and as for me, if I am to keep my lead I must have a good start. The car they're on's a flier, I tell you!"

Hardwicke stopped the machine, sprang out in all haste, and, waving his hand—there was no time for parting injunctions—made a dash for the cliff. Woodcock then took the wheel, and set off as if a thousand devils were after him.

"Love a duck!" he said, as he went. "I've almost made myself believe that I'm escaping with my life in my hand. Ha, ha, ha! But I must keep it up until I'm out of hearing, or darling Jack'll wonder. Goodness knows what he'll think when he finds the other car doesn't come along."

Here Woodcock turned his head to see if by any chance the other car did happen to be coming that way. What was his surprise to see its lights nearing the Grange gates.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "What are they playing at? They can't be after him. Heavens, they're after me! It's the Governor's car, for twopence! He's going round the country telling the outlying inhabitants to look out for me. He'll pull up at the Grange gates, as likely as not, and go in and make inquiries. There's one thing—it'll convince darling Jack that they're on his track, and I shall have no difficulty in finding him in the morning."

Woodcock was so anxious to see whether the car pulled up at the Grange gates that he brought his machine to a standstill and watched. In less than half a minute he was satisfied on the point. The lights of the car burned clear and steady on the roadway by the Grange.

"Yes, it's me they're after," he said. Then with a laugh he set off merrily for London, congratulating himself on the fact that there was now no need for him to run the risks he would have run if he had been forced to go by train. Yes, to London by motor; that was the way. There he could change his dress-clothes for an ordinary suit, pawn darling Jack's diamond, and, returning to Avington on the morrow, interview Miss Woods in darling Jack's interest.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN FROM INDIA.

THAT evening the interior of the Grange seemed to be redolent of an indescribable atmosphere of expectant anxiety. It may possibly have been anxious expectancy; no man could tell, it was so indescribable. It arose, perhaps, from the incessant wanderings of a girl from room to room to listen from the windows for the sound of an approaching motor. The girl was Valentine Woods, and she was waiting for darling Jack.

Valentine was a fair-haired girl of nineteen, dainty, pretty, and winsome. Even in her present state of ruffled restlessness she looked charming enough clad all in white, with a rope of pearls about her neck.

She looked at the clock on the dining-room mantelpiece. Half-past eight, and Jack had said eight in his letter! Oh, what had happened to him? What, indeed! At that moment darling Jack was lying on his back in the dust beneath his car, swearing swears that were lost on the desert air.

Half an hour passed by, and the bells of Avington tolled nine, and then chimed, not "Life let us cherish" this time, but something that sounded suspiciously like "They all love Jack." They seemed to have a peculiar malapropism, those bells. It made Valentine quite jealous to hear them. She imagined herself forsaken by Jack, who was so hedged in by adoring females that he had quite forgotten her. But hark! What was that? The sound of a motor approaching!

She ran to the window and listened.

"Ah!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Its Jack—my Jack—and he's driving like the wind because he's late!"

She stood breathless, listening, with her heart—no, not in her mouth, but down at the gate—listening for the motor to pull up on the road beyond the

trees that hemmed in the place. It did so.

"I knew it!" she cried. "It's Jack at last!"

But her delight gave way to surprise when the motor, after pausing some ten or fifteen seconds, moved on again, and went down the road at a rapid pace. But still she waited, thinking that Jack had got out and was coming up the path, while a hired driver was taking the car on. Yet no Jack came; but presently another car stopped at the gate, and her spirits rose again.

In a few moments there came a ring at the bell, and presently Baylis, the old butler, appeared, and handed her a card.

"Colonel Smyth-Walton," she read, with a crestfallen face. Then, turning to Baylis, she added, "The Governor of the gaol! What does he want, Baylis?"

"Don't know, miss. He gave me quite a turn, if you understand my meanin'. He wanted to see the master, miss; and when I tells him as master was away, he says he'd like to see you, miss."

"Well, I will see him, Baylis," said Valentine, trying to banish from her mind the fact that the second motor had come hard on the track of the first, as if it had been chasing it.

But her fears were soon set at rest when the visitor came into the room. He was a short-set, somewhat bald-headed, monocled man of about sixty, with a fierce grey moustache and bushy grey eyebrows that were settled in a perpetual frown of authority. But the most striking part about him was his nose, which burned with official zeal and other things. As he advanced and shook hands with Valentine—for they had often met before in a social way—he said:

"You must excuse my calling at this late hour, Miss Woods, but a matter of grave importance compels me."

Valentine felt as if she was sinking through the floor heavily weighted with apprehension; but she controlled herself sufficiently to inquire what was the cause of his visit.

"A convict has escaped from the gaol," he said—"a dangerous character—and I think it my duty to drive round to all the outlying inhabitants to warn them. You haven't seen any signs of him, I suppose? He's clean-shaven, of course; five feet eight inches, between colours, and has one broken tooth in front."

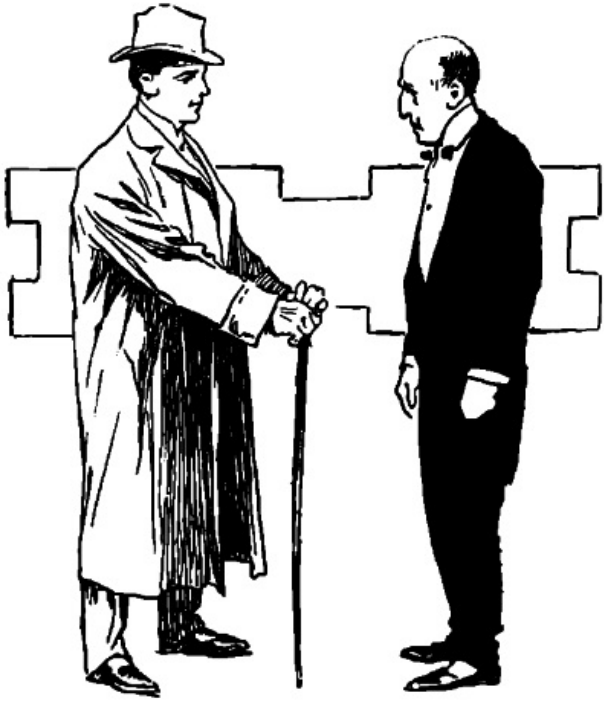
Valentine was somewhat relieved. She even smiled inwardly at the fanciful thought that at any time the little man's big nose might set fire to his bushy moustaches. Then she informed him that she had seen no sign of the fugitive, but she would tell Baylis to be sure to lock the house up securely that night.

Hastily then the visitor withdrew, to continue his round, and Valentine was left again to her uncertainties. All through that night they continued, and on the

following day she wired to her lover in Scarborough. His man evidently opened the wire, for a reply came back: “Mr. H. left for Avington in motor three yesterday.”

This did not in any way calm Valentine’s anxiety. She felt sure that something dreadful had happened to Jack. Most likely he was killed, otherwise he would have wired her. Or, worse still, he had forgotten or forsaken her, and gone somewhere else.

It was about lunch-time, when she was sitting disconsolate, thinking these thoughts, that there came a ring at the bell. Could that be Jack at last?



We must leave the question with her, and follow Baylis to the door. On opening it he found there a clean-shaven, well-dressed gentleman, with a gold-knobbed cane and a new pair of gloves. He wore a bland smile on his face—a smile that almost quenched the rascality in his eye. His hair was so neatly arranged that it was not obviously a wig. It was not easy for any one to recognise Convict 49 in the fashionable-looking young man on the steps. The station-master at Avington, the porter, the police, and the populace, who never dreamed of watching the incoming trains, had not recognised Woodcock; and now, as he smiled blandly on the butler at the Grange, there was nothing in his appearance to connect him with the object of Colonel Smyth-Walton’s visit the night before.

“Good day,” said Woodcock. “Is Major Woods in?”

“No, sir,” returned Baylis, trying to look as if he knew a gentleman when he saw one, “he ain’t, sir. He’s on the Continong, if you understand my meanin’, sir.”

Woodcock looked crestfallen; indeed, by his face one might have imagined he had come a thousand miles to see him.

This is just what Baylis did imagine. By some mysterious cerebration he coupled the sunburnt face before him with the East, and jumped to the conclusion that somehow or other this might be the brother officer's son from India, arrived before his time. Woodcock unconsciously fostered this conclusion by his next words, well considered to disarm suspicion.

"What a pity!" he said. "I've missed him. Perhaps——"

He was going to ask for Miss Woods; but Baylis now feeling more and more certain that the conclusion that he had jumped to was the correct one, broke in with:

"Beggin' your pardon for askin', sir, but maybe you're the very gentleman master's gone to Brindisi to meet?"

It struck Woodcock all of a heap that perhaps he was. He hadn't thought of it before; but, then, he very seldom did think many steps ahead. As he smiled at the butler—that smile of his which might mean anything from a horsewhipping to an invitation to lunch—he suddenly made up his mind to act the part to the best of the butler's belief.

"You've hit it," he said. "My name is Armstrong. I arrived by an earlier boat than I had expected, and so missed your master. I've left my luggage to be sent down by a later train. You might send someone for it to-night." He whisked a sovereign from the trousers pocket of his new grey suit and slipped it into Baylis's hand. "Miss Woods is at home, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Come in, sir. She will be surprised to see you. If you can understand my meanin', I was surprised myself, sir, notwithstandin' what master said before he left. 'Now, Baylis,' he sez to me, 'if by any chance Mr. Armstrong and me miss each other, and he arrives before I get back, you know what to do,' he sez. 'Make him at home; give him of the very best. And mind,' he sez, 'if he's got anything to complain of, when I get back I shall hold you responsible for it,' he sez to me. And I 'ope I shall make you at 'ome, sir."

This in the hall while Woodcock was putting his hat and stick away.

"All right, old targuts," he remarked, by way of reply.

"Beg parding, sir?"

"Ah, I was talking in Hindustanee. You see, I always address my own butler in his own language, and you're making me at home so quickly that I forgot I was in England. Now, then, where's Miss Valentine?"

"This way, sir—this way." And Baylis, picking up his walrus feet, reached and opened the drawing-room door. "Take a seat, sir; Miss Woods will be with you in a moment."

With that he shuffled off, and Woodcock found time to chuckle as he looked about him at the elegantly-furnished room.

“So help me Robert,” he said, “I’m afraid it’s all off with darling Jack’s message! I’m a bally Anglo-Indian now, with a liver inside me like a last year’s walnut. I mustn’t forget that liver. But darling Jack—what’s going to happen to him? I don’t know. And as for me—well, I’m all right. The old buttling baldhead with the walrus feet—he’s on my side, anyhow. ‘Give him of the very best!’ Ha, ha!”

His quiet laugh was cut short by the entrance of Valentine, who came forward with a forced smile on her face.

“Mr. Armstrong,” she said, “this is, indeed, a pleasure! The Major will be so annoyed that he has missed you.”

Woodcock saw from her face that she was not prepared to climb down from one word of what she had said about the “horrid brute” in her letter to darling Jack, but that at the same time she had made up her mind to treat him with all the politeness due to the son of her guardian uncle’s brother officer. Her last remark was tantamount to asking him how the thunder he got there. Accordingly he proceeded to explain.

“Ah,” he said, sinking into an armchair, “he won’t be half as annoyed as I am at missing him like this.” He made a mental note in passing that that was one for her. “But, you see, not knowing he was coming to meet me, I came by the earlier boat. Now, if you had been coming to meet me, Miss Valentine—

well——”

“Well what?” she asked, simply to fill in the pause.

“Well, I should have come by an earlier boat still.”

“Would you, really?” she replied, with a slight toss of the head, in spite of her resolve to be icily polite.

Woodcock was glad he had said it, for it showed him that he had identified himself with the real Armstrong already to such an extent that he was paying back with interest all the horrid brutes she had called him in her letter to darling Jack.

“As it was,” she went on, “you came by the——”

“By the earlier boat.”

He was getting into a mess. He had looked up the ‘Calcutta’ at the shipping office, but he hadn’t troubled sufficiently about the boat before it to remember the name.

“I mean——” she persisted.

“Ah, I beg pardon. You mean the name of the boat. The ‘Calcutta.’ That is to say, I booked my passage by the ‘Calcutta,’ but changed my mind, and came by the one before it. Oh, by the way, that reminds me.”

He slapped his breast-pocket, and rapidly went through the motions of feeling himself all over, like a man who has lost something.

“What is it?” she asked, in a fair way to forget all about the name of the earlier boat.

“What is it? Why, my cigar-case. I believe—yes, I do believe I left it in my cabin. Yes, under my pillow. Confound it! That rascally steward will pinch it. It was a jewelled one, too—a present from the Maharajah of Gwalior, for saving his three-year-old child from a man-eating tiger. I wouldn’t have given a hundred pounds for that cigar-case.”

During this he had worked himself up into a fluster, in which he deemed no one on earth would be so callous as to insist on the name of that earlier boat, however much one wanted to know it. But there he was in error.

“You had better write to the captain,” suggested Valentine, with polite sympathy; “or, better still, wire to him.”

“That’s the ticket! I’ll wire to him like lightning. Where’s the telegraph office?”

As he spoke he got up from the armchair in a way that seemed to say he hadn’t a moment to lose.

“You needn’t trouble,” she said. “Baylis will take it for you.”

“No, no,” returned Woodcock, striding for the door. “I’ll do it myself.

Besides, I may be able to telephone, you know, to the shipping office, or Scotland Yard, or somewhere."

"Very well," she replied. "We'll wait lunch for you."

"Right you are. I shan't be long."

With that he dashed out, seized his hat, and went down the drive like a man escaping from justice. When he neared the gate, well out of view of the house, he slowed down, and remarked:

"Whew! Now I've got time to think these little matters out. That's what I wanted—time to think. It was a bit too hot at the start for me. Old walrus feet sprang it on me so sudden who I really was that I nearly fell into the soup. Now for darling Jack. The poor beggar must be getting hungry."

With that he opened the gate, and, crossing the road, found a hand-bag that he had hidden in the ditch before going in. With this he scaled the fence and crossed the field in the direction of the deserted quarries.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FARING OF ANOTHER FUGITIVE.

WOODCOCK had never worked in these old quarries during his residence at the gaol. They were before his day, having been given up some ten years since to the wild will of nature. Now they afforded an excellent hiding and abiding place for rabbits, owls, bats, mice, and men who had motored to the public danger.

As Woodcock ran in among the underscrub, whistling "Life let us cherish," according to promise, he half expected to see darling Jack come running out wagging his tail, like a dog delighted to see him. But no such joyous greeting awaited him. Still whistling, he pushed on till at last he stood on the edge of a pit that shelved gradually downwards to a spot against the base of the cliff where some tall weeds and bushes grew.

Here he paused and listened. A faint "Hi, hi!" came from somewhere. It sounded like the voice of a man with his head in a milk-can. Woodcock could not locate the sound, so he resumed his whistling, thinking that Hardwicke, wherever he was, would come to him. But all that came of it was the same far-off, muffled "Hi, hi!" like the voice of a man with his foot in a rat-trap.

"Why doesn't he come?" said Woodcock, impatiently. Then, as he listened again, he fancied that the voice came from among the bushes at the base of the cliff. Deciding to investigate, he made his way down the shelving descent.

Where the bushes began there was a little pathway among them; and this, coupled with a strong smell of fox, told plainly that one of those animals had made his den somewhere within.

Once more Woodcock tuned his whistle, and this time he could hear plainly that the muffled reply came from immediately beyond the bushes. A few strides through the cover brought him to a point where he could see, and sympathize with, Hardwicke's reasons for not coming in answer to the signal.

There was darling Jack—or, at least, the lower half of him—protruding from the mouth of the fox's den. His upper half, once squeezed in, was too big to squeeze back again, and his lower half was too big to drag after him. The mouth of the den was a horizontal slit about four feet long and something short of a foot high. It was big enough for Hardwicke's waist, but Woodcock thought he must have been pushed pretty hard to squeeze the upper portion of

his body through.

"How on earth did you get fixed like that?" asked Woodcock, lowering his mouth to the opening of the pit.

"I heard them searching the quarry for me last night," came the weary reply from within, "and this was the only place I could find. I thought I could get through. But when I got this far I got stuck. I've been here all night. For God's sake get me out!"

"Easier said than done," replied Woodcock, surveying the upper margin of the slit. "I can take your legs and pull, if that's any use."

"Try it."

So Woodcock took Hardwicke by the ankles and pulled like a dentist, but without result.

"No use," he said. "You're too bulky. Of course, in a few days, when you get thinner, you'll come out easy enough. I've brought you some things to eat, but you'd better not have them now; it'd only make matters worse. I should say by to-morrow evening you ought to be fit to pull."

A groan from within greeted these remarks, and then Hardwicke implored him to see what he could do.

Again Woodcock surveyed the position. He noticed this time that Hardwicke's coat was tucked up against the upper margin of the rock. Realizing that this might make a difference of half an inch, he tried to smooth it out; but it was too firmly fixed.

"Have you room in there to take your coat off?" he asked.

"No; scarcely room to breathe."

"H'm! If you could only get that coat off! And you say you can't wait till it rots off. Hold hard; the ground you're lying on isn't rock. I see how it can be done. I'll dig away the stuff on one side of you with my knife; then you can shift over a bit and back out. That sounds all right, doesn't it?"

"Yes; only make haste."

Woodcock took out his knife and set to work. The soil was hard, but by dint of cutting and slashing and scratching he soon worked out a hollow three or four inches deep and eighteen inches wide. Then he helped Hardwicke to shift himself over into it, and finally dragged him out.

When he was landed he looked like an old parsnip that had gone bad at the roots. His hair was full of dust and bits of goose bones and feathers. His face was a picture. His collar was burst away from its fastenings, and his white waistcoat was no longer white.

Woodcock could not keep back a grin, but in order to spare Hardwicke's

feelings he turned away to clean his knife on a stone. When he faced round, darling Jack was holding a cold roast fowl in both hands, and treating the poor thing as if he were trying to swallow it whole. His first thought had been to seize on the bag that Woodcock had set down near by and get at its inner meaning. Woodcock sat down on a flat stone in the little space hemmed in against the cliff by the bushes, and, taking a cigar from his waistcoat pocket, lighted it and smoked for some time in silence.

"There's a bottle of wine in that bag," he said at length.

"Got a corkscrew?" asked Hardwicke, with his mouth full.

"Yes; there's one in my knife;" and Woodcock went over to the bag, drew forth the bottle, opened it, and handed it to Hardwicke.

In about ten minutes, when the hungry fugitive had eaten and drunk to his satisfaction, he asked:

"Well, you saw Miss Woods? And what did you tell her?"

Woodcock had been preparing for the question, and had made up his mind on various points.

"Yes," he replied, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air. "But I'll begin at the beginning. I took your car up to London and stored it at Tilbury's. Here's the ticket." He drew a slip from his pocket and handed it over. "Then I came down by an early train, and went straight to the Grange. There, just as I was going in at the gate, I was confronted by a detective in plain clothes. He thought I was you, I suppose, and I had to show him my card and talk to him like a Dutch uncle before I could convince him I wasn't."

The effect of this upon Hardwicke fully justified Woodcock's expectations. He turned pale, and looked towards the fox's den as if it were his only hope.

"Did he see you come here?" he asked, apprehensively.

"No fear," returned Woodcock, with a wink. "I dodged round another way when I came out. Well, as I was going to say, when I got to the house I was shown in, and it was some time before I could get a chance to speak to Miss Woods alone. There was a fellow there from India——"

Hardwicke gave a start and knit his brows.

"What was his name?" he asked, quickly.

"Armstrong, if I remember rightly. A big chap, clean-shaven—rather a fine-looking fellow. Do you know him?"

Hardwicke clenched his hands.

"No," he said; "and, what's more, I don't want to. But I've heard about him. Go on."

"Well, this Armstrong fellow suddenly remembered that he'd left his cigar-

case on the ship, and went off in a hurry to the telegraph office. Then I got a chance to tell her that I'd come all the way from Scarborough to say that you'd had an accident, and had got concussion of the brain—nothing serious, but that you would be laid up for a week."

"Yes, yes! What did she say? What did she do?"

"Why, she wrung her hands and carried on, and wanted to know the name of the hospital, so that she could go and see you. I replied that you were at your sister's house, and there I made a mess of it. You ought to have explained things more fully to me."

Woodcock paused and looked apologetic.

"H'm!" said Hardwicke, looking crestfallen. "I haven't a sister. Well, what did she say?"

"She carried on worse than ever—burst into tears, and demanded the name of the woman."

"Whew! And——"

"I said I didn't know. I had evidently been misinformed; it might have been your aunt."

"No good—no good. I haven't got an aunt."

"Well, anyhow, she had the sense to ask how old the aunt was, and I had the sense to reply that she was seventy if she was a day. That smoothed matters off a bit, though it didn't quite explain how I had come to think she was your sister."

Hardwicke laughed. His escape from the fox's den and the wine and the food had brightened him up a bit.

"Well," continued Woodcock, "then I told her that you were in a raging delirium, and all you could say was 'Valentine! Valentine!' I think you told me that was her name?"

"I don't remember, but I must have done so. Go on."

"Well, then she pleaded hard to be allowed to see you, but I said the doctor's orders were emphatic. I was adamant. I would not even give her your aunt's address. And while she was begging and praying for it the Armstrong fellow came back, and I took my leave, with hurried injunctions from her in the hall to call every day and let her know how you were getting on."

"Can you do that?" asked Hardwicke.

"Oh, yes," returned Woodcock, with an independent air. "I'm on a holiday here, so my time's my own. I'll call on Miss Woods every day, and as soon as it's fairly dark I'll look you up here every evening, perhaps oftener. You must stay where you are. They're looking for you

everywhere. I shouldn't be at all surprised if there are three or four, besides the man I saw, keeping a watch on the Grange. You mustn't venture out on any consideration. If I were you, I'd hollow out the hole a bit and get in. They'd never think of looking in there for you, even if they did search this place."

"It's beastly stuffy in there," objected Hardwicke.

"It's stuffier still in gaol," returned Woodcock, and there was a three years' experience behind his words. "It's the only thing you can do. In less than a week I'll put 'em off the scent somehow, and then you'll be all right."

"You're very good to me," said Hardwicke, gratefully. "One of my best friends could not be kinder."

"Rubbish!" returned Woodcock. "Look here: I'll bring you a thick eiderdown to-night for you to lie on, and enough grub to last you till to-morrow night. Now I must be off."

When Hardwicke had again expressed his thanks, and beseeched him to bring him word of Valentine as soon as he could, Woodcock went off; and, knowing that Hardwicke would not be watching him any more than any of the other fictitious people of his circumstantial fairy tale, he hurried across to the Grange, where he found Valentine and lunch waiting for him.

CHAPTER VII.

AN IMPROMPTU DANCE.

AT lunch Woodcock led the conversation, and led it well away from anything like question and answer. It hardly need be said that he was a good romancer, and the way he romanced it on Valentine did credit to his inventive powers. He knew very little about India, except that one might raise the thirst of Roland there—thus gaining much, but losing his own liver. There was one place, however, that he knew fairly well, and that was Alexandria. He had been there once, on a commission for his master, to look up a client. That was four years ago; and he had a distinct memory of a visit to a haschisch den, kept by a job-master. It was only necessary, then, to describe his adventures there as having happened quite lately, on his way home from India. This he did, and it proved interesting enough to Valentine, who, although downhearted, could still laugh politely when the story required it.

It was a long account. It lasted all through the soup, the fish, and the entrée. Baylis nearly disjointed it at last, when he brought in a bottle of old crusted port that he had ready for special occasions; but Woodcock, realising that as soon as he sat down, so to speak, questions would be asked, simply drank off glass after glass in the middle of sentences, and trusted to Valentine's politeness not to interrupt. Once she did attempt it.

"Did you like India?" she asked, as Woodcock, who seemed to think he was doing the correct thing in draining his glass as soon as Baylis had refilled it, was undoing the butler's work for the fourth time.

"Yes," he replied; "but I was in Alexandria when this happened, you know." Then he continued his story.

At last he noticed that she thought he was in the way of drinking too much wine, so he brought his long-winded narration to a tentative close. She took advantage of it, and, remarking that she must go and write some letters—writing letters is the feminine of siesta—she withdrew.

"Good port, Baylis," remarked Woodcock, when she had gone.

"Yes, sir," replied the butler. "Master told me to give you of the best."

"But I can't finish the bottle. You'd better have the rest. You'll have some heavy work over that luggage to-night, so you'd better fortify yourself."

"Thank you, sir," replied Baylis, removing the bottle. "I shall be very

pleased to drink your very good health, sir, if you understand my meanin'."

"I think so, Baylis. And look here: you can rely on me absolutely. Finish it off; it'll do you good. You look thin, you know—very thin. There's nothing like a drop of good old port."

Baylis felt strangely thin—thinner than he had ever felt, in fact—and went away to finish the bottle. Woodcock, for his part, took the first rug he could find and a couple of cushions, and strolled out into the garden to look for a soft spot. At last, beneath a great pear-tree, beside a flowing stream, he made himself comfortable. Then all of a sudden he remembered that he had forgotten his mission in life; and making his way back to the house, he sought out the major's library and searched among the shelves for the literature he wanted. He selected some dozen books, all on one subject—India; and, armed with these, he went back to his rug and cushions.

There was no time to sleep. He had to master enough of life in India to keep the ball rolling with Valentine. His way of fitting himself for the business was the most rapid in existence. He simply turned over page after page, and when he came to a word in italics he read the context. In this way he soon learned how to talk about his "sais," and his "kubadah," &c.

Then, having found suitable names for his polo ponies, and settled in his mind the peculiar ways of officers, their wives, and others, he felt he knew enough to carry him through the day. Then he settled himself to rest.

For three years past he had never had a sleep in the middle of the day. From morning till night he had always found something to do. In his busy round of life one thing or another—mostly one thing—had demanded his attention from the time he got up till the time he went to bed. And he had not toiled as those who toil for filthy lucre, greedily raking in the coin, and saying, "This will pay the rent," or "This will keep the brokers out." No; he had given his services freely, without thought of reward, and they had been accepted in the spirit in which they had been given. Accordingly, feeling that he deserved a rest, he dozed off, and dreamed that Valentine was chasing him about the equator to ask him what they did in India and what boat he came by. Once he nearly woke up, thinking he heard the early morning warder turning the key in the lock; but, seeing the pear-tree above him, he left the rest to Providence and dozed off again. Finally he was thoroughly aroused by the sound of a gong.

"H'm!" he said, getting up and straightening his wig. "I suppose that's tea." And he went in, to find Valentine arrayed in the fluffiest of gowns, seated at a little table in the drawing-room, ready to pour out.

"No milk in mine," he said as he entered. "We never take milk in India, you know—just half a lime, that's all. Oh, but, of course, you don't grow limes

here, do you? I was forgetting."

"Sugar?"

"Rather not. Liver, you know—liver. I've hardly any left, as it is."

"I always thought tea itself wasn't good for the liver."

"Doesn't hurt mine. Ah, Miss Woods, it's the whisky-pegs that do the trick. It's a relief to get away from them."

"What do you do in India in the afternoons?"

"Well, it's so hot you can't do anything—except drink whisky-pegs. They're the only things that keep you going. I used to keep my sais at the refrigerator from twelve till three every day. The beggar had a way of bringing the pegs without any ice, you know."

"But I thought a sais was the man who cut the grass and ran in front of the 'rickshaw'."

Woodcock laughed as he set down his cup.

"Where did you get that idea?" he asked.

"From Kipling, I fancy."

"Kipling! Good Lord. He doesn't know anything about India. You should hear our boys laugh at Kipling! He's all right over here; but this isn't India, you know."

"He's supposed to give a true account of life over there, I always thought."

"Not a bit of it. True account of life! D'you call this a true account of life:

" 'A woman's only a woman,
But a good cigar's a smoke'?"

Woodcock had read that down in the garden.

"D'you mean to tell me," he went on, "that you're going to stick up for a man who talks that way? A sais a fellow who cuts the grass? Well, what next? Why, I shouldn't be at all surprised if Kipling wears a kamaband round his neck instead of a tie!"

Valentine laughed. Woodcock was beginning to interest her, more especially as he rated women higher than smokes, and most especially as he seemed to have no idea of her guardian's plan that she should marry him. All the same, she wished her darling Jack would come along.

"Oh, no," went on Woodcock. "You get your ideas about modern life in India from those who have just come over, and you won't be far out."

Then, when he had drunk a second cup, a bright idea struck him. Pointing to the piano, he said:

"Please play me the latest waltz."

Now, Valentine prided herself upon her playing, and the suggestion pleased her. She rose, and rang the bell for the tea to be cleared away, then crossed over to the piano and started up a particularly fetching waltz. It got into Woodcock's heels. He rose from his chair with a wild look in his eye. For three years his boots had been too heavy to dance in, and this was a fitting moment to kick the dust of the gaol from his feet. He began to circle round, with his arms akimbo. Then he grabbed a chair and held it as a partner. At this moment a pretty housemaid entered to clear away the tea; but she got no farther than the centre of the room, where Woodcock, relinquishing the chair, grabbed her round the waist, and soon had her swinging round in spite of herself.

"Oh, sir, sir, stop!" she cried, between laughter and speechless amazement; but Woodcock had no ideas of stopping. He whirled her nearly off her feet; and then, as the music came to a sudden stop, they collided with a chair, and both went sprawling on the carpet.

The housemaid gathered herself up first, and without more ado administered a sounding smack on Woodcock's face. Then, with a glance at Valentine, who had faced round on the piano stool, and was sitting with her hands half raised in horror, she fled incontinently from the room.

Woodcock laughed as he scrambled to his feet.

"I am surprised at you, Mr. Armstrong!" said Valentine, severely. "Is that what you do in India—dance with servant-maids?"

"Common custom there," said Woodcock, smoothing down his ruffled wig.

“It’s not a common custom here,” returned Valentine.

“Well, to tell you the truth,” said Woodcock, taking a chair, “your playing got into my heels; and when I’m under the influence of music I don’t quite know what I’m doing.”

Valentine wheeled round to the piano to conceal a smile which she could not repress.

“You see,” went on Woodcock, “I’ve bottled up such a lot of superfluous energy for the last three—three weeks or so on board ship that I must let it off somehow.”

“I see,” said Valentine. “But please don’t do it again.”

“Right oh! But look here, Miss Woods: don’t you find it rather slow staying in the house all day with no one to amuse you except myself?”

“You mean you find it slow?” she returned, toying with the piano keys.

“Well, put it that way if you like. But say, now, if I get some horses, will you come out for a ride?”

She shook her head.

“I never go out much,” she said.

“Well, a motor drive?”

Again she shook her head. Motors reminded her of darling Jack.

“I tell you what I’ll do if you find it dull,” she said. “I’ll ask someone to dinner to-morrow night, if you like.”

“Ah, that’s the ticket! Who shall it be?”

He rose, and stood with hands in his pockets and a fresh interest in life on his face. Valentine considered a moment.

“The Rev. Silas Browne,” she suggested. “How would he do?”

“No,” returned Woodcock; “a parson always excites my sympathy. I want fun.”

Valentine thought again.

“Let me see,” she said. “The funniest man I know is Colonel Smyth-Walton, the Governor of the gaol.”

Woodcock started inwardly, but he made no outward sign. Then he would have given half a dollar to be able to laugh. But he controlled his face successfully, and remarked:

“Has he ever been in India?”

“No, I don’t think so; but he’s very amusing.”

“All right, then. We’ll forgive his ignorance of India. Anything for a lark. To-morrow night, eh?”

“Very well. He’s an old friend of the Major’s. I’ll go into Avington and ring him up.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRAMP IN THE QUARRY.

WHILE VALENTINE walked into the town, Woodcock, who had purposely avoided going with her, took a turn round the grounds, chuckling to himself over the promised adventure on the following evening.

"I wonder if he'll notice the likeness to No. 49?" he said. "I expect he will at first, if he looks close enough; then he'll look in vain for the broken tooth, and that'll decide him. Ah, it was a master stroke of mine to have that patched up! But I'd sooner meet him than one of the warders. He's a bit short-sighted, and hasn't seen much of my amiable countenance. My! What a lark! I wonder if I could bribe Baylis to serve up a dish of skilly for dinner?"

He didn't quite see how this was to be done, ponder as he would. Presently in his wanderings he came to the thick plantation that shut in the grounds from the road, and, threading his way in among the trees, finally leaned on the wire fence looking over into the field that led towards the quarries. He felt sorry for darling Jack over there, all alone in the fox's den. How things had changed since his first meeting with him! Then his idea had been to get Hardwicke to hire him at so much a week to keep his terrible secret. Now he was quite content to enjoy himself at the Grange, and at the same time to have the pleasure of keeping the prisoner in luxury in the fox's den. But how should he

explain the depredations on the larder? Baylis would begin to wonder.

While he was thinking of a way, a dilapidated tramp, lean and hungry-looking, trudged by, with his eyes fixed on the ground, as if searching for diamonds. The sight of him gave Woodcock an idea. He considered for a moment, then turned quickly and made his way back to the house.

"Baylis!" he cried, striding through the hall, "Baylis!"

There was a shuffling of feet, and a "Coming sir—coming," and then Baylis appeared.

"I don't know what you do with poor, hungry, starving tramps here, Baylis," he said, with the mild light of benevolence in his eyes; "but in India we always give them a bagful of good food and a bottle of wine the first time, and if they come a second time we hand them over to the police for begging. There's one of them at the gate now."

Baylis scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, sir," he said, "I generally sends 'em away at sight, if you understand my meanin'."

"What? And, for all you know, they may be honest men on the verge of starvation! It seems very hard to treat them like that. Don't you think so?"

Baylis was not willing to lay himself open to a charge of hard-heartedness, so he melted quickly into Woodcock's charitable mood.

"It does, sir—it does, indeed," he admitted in a voice of pity.

"Of course," replied Woodcock. "They are all our brothers and sisters, you know, and it behoves us to help them—once, at least. Not twice, mind you; that's encouraging them. Pack up something good, Baylis, and put a bottle of wine in it. We cannot turn him away from our gates. He shall be happy for once in his life. Ah, Baylis, it's a fine thing to help the fatherless and to give to those that are in need."

"It is, sir—it is indeed," returned Baylis, with tears in his voice, as he shuffled off to collect the materials for Woodcock's gentle charities. Presently he returned with an assortment of things, plain and delicate, in a kit, a bottle of wine among them. With these Woodcock hurried away across the lawn to the plantation. There, reaching the wire fence, he looked carefully up and down the road. No one was in sight. Valentine had long since rounded the corner, and was by this time in Avington. But there was something he had forgotten—the rug. No; that would be safer after dark. So he left it where it was beneath the pear tree, and, skipping across the road, made for the quarries.

When he reached the edge of the shelving pit and started to make his way down, he heard a slight commotion in the neighbourhood of the fox's den. Parting the bushes and pushing through, he caught sight of darling Jack's legs

slowly disappearing within the narrow opening.

With a rapid snatch he seized one boot and held it. The body belonging to the boot became instinct with fright. Woodcock then set down his parcel and pulled and pulled, and finally dragged the whole body forth.

"Good Lord!" he said, with feigned surprise, as Hardwicke sat up and faced him. "I thought it was somebody going in after you."

"Why didn't you whistle 'Life let us cherish'?" demanded Hardwicke.

"Quite forgot about it. But look here: you must practise the climbing-in trick and bring it down to five seconds or you'll be caught. You've got plenty of time to get it perfect. And it's highly essential. I'll give you a rehearsal if you like, just to see if you've got the movements right. I'll go up to the edge of the pit, and you sit out here sunning yourself. Then I'll say 'Go!' and start to walk at an ordinary pace down to the bushes, while you make for your den with as little noise as possible."

"All right," returned Hardwicke. "We'll try it."

Woodcock walked to the top, cried, "Go!" and then started down. As he approached he heard a sound as of waistcoat buttons being scraped off, and when he reached the den there was no sign of the fox.

"That was all right, wasn't it?" said Hardwicke peering out.

"Yes; very good. You might even with practice, get it down to three seconds; that's the regular rabbit time. Now come forth and eat, drink and be merry. I've brought you some delicacies and another bottle of wine."

Darling Jack scrambled out, and maintained that he had eaten largely of the first parcel, but that he could do with a drink.

While this was being negotiated Hardwicke inquired eagerly after Valentine, and elicited the information that Woodcock had not called again—twice in one day was too much. He would do so on the morrow, however, and then bring him the latest information. But in the meantime he had heard something that made his (Hardwicke's) position rather risky.

"What is it?" inquired Hardwicke, with a long face.

"Well, you see," returned Woodcock, "a convict has escaped from the gaol, and they're searching the country for him."

"Whew! And you mean they may search this place at any moment?"

"Yes, unfortunately. That's why it's so necessary for you to practise the disappearing trick day and night to get it perfect. At any minute you might hear a warder's footstep, and then everything depends upon your agility. Hush! Did you hear anything?" Woodcock's quick ears had caught a sound.

"Yes, some one moving among the bushes. 'Sh! He's coming this way."

“Now, then,” said Woodcock, “into the den, quick! Leave the things. I’ll hide behind that rock over there.”

Like lightning Hardwicke turned and ran to earth beneath the rock. Woodcock withdrew noiselessly, and concealed himself behind a large stone some five yards away. A few seconds later there came through the bushes the identical tramp he had seen passing the Grange some little time before—the hungry, hollow-eyed sufferer for whom he had secured the delicacies from Baylis.

No sooner did he see the things spread on the grass, and the bottle of wine more than three-parts full propped against a stone, than he swooped down on them with a chuckle. Woodcock thought of stepping out and saving the things from a terrible end; but just as he was about to do so another footstep was heard on the shelving pitside. It came more rapidly than the first, and in another moment he saw a carbine glinting through the bushes. Then a warder pushed through, started at finding someone there, then came forward.

“Ha, there you are!” said the warder to the tramp, who paused in the midst of a drink, bottle in hand, and stared hard at the intruder, just as if he had seen him before somewhere.

“I followed you up,” said the warder, “to ask if you’d seen anything of an escaped convict in your wanderings.”

“Nope,” replied the tramp. “But I heerd summat over in the thicket on the moor t’other side of Avington.”

“Whew!” whistled Woodcock, beneath his breath. “I wonder what he heard?”

Then for the first time he scrutinized the warder’s face, and recognised it as that of the man who had been bashed by the motor and sent out disguised in his own clothes to lead a new life in a far country. It was getting interesting, especially as the warder’s face had fallen several degrees at the tramp’s remark.

“What did you hear?” was all the man could say.

“Well,” returned the tramp, with his mouth full, “I not only heerd, but I seen. The noise of talkin’ woke me up. An’ I listened. Yus, an’ I seen.” Here he scanned the warder all over critically. “Yus, they fits you wery well—might ’ave bin made for yer. ‘Now, my man, seein’ as ’ow I ’elped bash yer up,’ ’e sez, ‘and as ’ow you bain’t in a position to charge us—wot oh!—well, I’m willin’ to give yer a fresh start in life—wot ho, Charley!—a fresh start in a noo land, w’ere yer can leave yer dreadful past behind yer and make a fortune, and get married and settle dahn, and—oh, chase me, girls!—and now I sh’d advise you to make for the sea coast, and ask everybody yer meets if they’ve seen No.

49. You'll bilk 'em, sure; and it's my opinion if yer chases yerself to the sea coast yer'll do the trick."

Woodcock, lying low behind his stone, had difficulty in suppressing himself. It was evident that this hilarious tramp, who expressed his meaning tolerably clearly, with his mouth full, had overheard the last part of the conversation in the thicket. He was afraid he would go on to mention a "torf in a 'igh 'at," and perhaps an empty valise, and so give him away to Hardwicke in the fox's den; but he observed, with relief, that the warder was in a fair way to make for the open sea without hearing any more.

The tramp observed it also, and holding out the bottle, remarked, cheerily:

"It's all right, mate—have a drink; it'll last yer till yer gets to the oashing. There's a bloomin' waste o' waters in that direction. Come on; it's good stuff."

The warder seized the bottle and took a long pull. Then, after passing it back, he extended his hand.

"Thanks," he said. "You'll keep what you know to yourself?"

"Well," replied the tramp, seizing the warder's hand in his grimy paw, "I don't go in for no prices on no 'eads. But look 'ere, No. 49: it's my dooty to 'and yer over, or at least put 'em on yer track. Think of the bloomin' waste of public time in searchin' the country for yer, to say nuthink o' the fact that ye're likely to commit several murders in concussion."

He paused and munched in silence, while the warder went down on his knees and pleaded with him. He ripped open an apple pie, and, using the crust as a shovel, scooped up the fruit and conveyed it to his mouth. He had probably never been petitioned in this way before, and was evidently enjoying it.

At length he seemed to have made up his mind. Turning to the warder, he remarked:

"Well, you see, you're not exactly in a position to give me in charge. Er"—(munch)—"how do the clothes fit?"

Getting no reply to this, he went on, breaking a madeira cake and handing the warder a moiety:

"Yus, it's something to know you killed a man of your own size, ain't it?"

The warder groaned as well as he could with his mouth full of cake, and Woodcock began to get uneasy. What if that tramp had searched the well and found no corpse? What if he were going to spring it on the warder that the "torf in the 'igh 'at" had bamboozled him? That the warder whom Hardwicke thought he had killed was alive, running about in his own clothes, under the impression that he was No. 49? Oh, heavens! What if the tramp had seen the whole thing?

Woodcock prepared to disclose himself the moment any revelation threatened, and risk the equal chance of both men recognising him. Even that would be better than letting the tramp run on in full hearing of Hardwicke, for he could at least change the conversation, or get them away from the fox's den. But the tramp's next words reassured him somewhat. The warder, still on his knees and hungrily munching the cake, as if his hunger and his fear of justice ran each other level, begged and prayed with muffled utterances. What with his fervent supplication and the cake, he was almost choking. So was Woodcock, who was now cramming his handkerchief into his mouth, as he noted the solemn, serious faces of both judge and suppliant. At last the tramp took a long pull from the bottle, then waved his hand decisively. The warder seized it, and almost wept upon it.

"Enough!" said the tramp, deeply touched. "I will shield you. Now be off before I change my mind, and take care you never fall into the hands of the law again."

"Thank you! Thank you!" gasped the warder; and without more ado he was off through the bushes and up the side of the pit.

"Don't forget you've got to lead a better life," cried the tramp after him; then, getting no answer, he lay back on the grass and patted his stomach and cackled. But the bottle was not yet finished. There was still a good long drink in it, and the tramp lost no time in getting it into circulation.

"Good!" he said, throwing the empty bottle away. "Wish I had a throat a mile long. I wonder who's missed that lot? Ha! 'E don't know 'e's missed it yet; but 'e will soon, or my name's not—— Now, wot the devil is my name? I've got so many—(hic)—guesh I'd better clare out, sheein' I'm not in fit

shtate t' exshplain matter."

So he rose, gloriously full of all Baylis's delicacies, and staggered off, singing, "Life let us cherish," a long way after the tuneful bells of Avington.

The moment he had left, Woodcock sprang up and hastened away with all silence and caution. He did not want to be pumped by Hardwicke on various points while the subject-matter was still fresh in mind. Better for darling Jack to wait an hour or two till Woodcock came back with the rug and whatever he could pick up in the way of food in the evening.

Accordingly he reached the outskirts of the quarries, and, seeing no one about except the tramp staggering off in another direction, he walked across the field and entered the Grange gate.

CHAPTER IX.

VALENTINE GETS A SHOCK.

AT nine o'clock or thereabouts that evening Baylis, having saved a drop of port out of the bottle for Jarvis, the coachman, and having as good as promised him an attenuated one, which in town the people call "half a thick 'un," out of Woodcock's pocket, proceeded with him in the dogcart to fetch the luggage from the station.

Woodcock heard them go, and looked up from Jennings's "Life on the Punjab" to remark to Valentine, who was sewing and wondering vaguely about darling Jack:

"Ah! They're going for my luggage; that's a relief!"

"Yes," returned Valentine. "Have you much?"

"Oh, about ten boxes, large and small," replied Woodcock, placing a thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat and looking large. "You see, the Major wants me to settle down, and I absolutely must have my Indian knick-knacks about me. From what he said in his letters, it isn't likely that I shall go back, so I've brought nearly all India over in boxes."

Valentine flushed as she realised that her guardian must have been very explicit in his remarks to Mr. Armstrong; and at the idea of her future being settled above her head in this fashion her gorge rose. She sprang out of her chair and faced Woodcock.

"Once for all, Mr. Armstrong," she cried, with flashing eyes, "I don't care what my guardian has said, but I will never, never marry you, not if I live to be a hundred."

Woodcock rose, and placing his hands in his pockets and his feet apart on the carpet, smiled sweetly.

"What's this?" he asked. "Your guardian never said a word to me about marrying you. On the contrary, he always promised me a good time here."

Valentine stared and bit her lip.

"I think you must be mistaken," went on Woodcock. "At least, I hope you are. I shouldn't like to think your guardian has brought me all this way for such an unhappy ending. I cannot understand it. What injury have I, the son of his brother officer, ever done him? I, Harold Armstrong, who have wished him

nothing but good because he was my father's friend!"

Valentine hung her head in great confusion and wished the floor would open. But Woodcock still went on rubbing it in.

"What did Baylis tell me when he welcomed me in the hall?" he asked, with fine, Socratic point. " 'Sir, Mr. Armstrong,' he said—those were his words—'master told me that if you arrived before him I was to give you of the very best.' Yes, those were his very words, and yet—and yet—— Oh, it is too much, too much!"

Valentine fairly drooped with shame which had been forced upon her like a cloak to conceal the fact that for once she had appeared without her modesty. Yet she made a brave show, and artfully pretended that she did not follow Woodcock's cutting sarcasm.

"I don't understand," she cried, trying to look puzzled. "You say you don't want to marry me?"

"Want to marry you?" laughed Woodcock, thinking that as she was asking for it she could have it. "Not much! I don't want to hurt your feelings, Miss Woods, but believe me when I say that I wouldn't marry you if you lived to be a hundred. I'm a very good judge of horseflesh, I am, I tell you!"

Then Valentine did a very sensible thing. She admitted herself beaten by holding out her hand and saying:

"Mr. Armstrong, I—I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I have been labouring under a silly misapprehension."

Woodcock took her hand, and laughed.

"Set your mind at rest," he said. "I'm married already, with a wife and five children."

"Married?" she gasped. "But you said in your letters that—that——"

Woodcock saw he had gone too far.

“I know exactly what I said in my letters,” he said, in an even tone; “but realise this, Miss Woods. As far as you are concerned I am married with a wife and five children, so that’s all right.”

“Oh, I see,” she replied. “You’re not really married, but——”

“Yes, that’s it exactly. I’m not really married, but——”

“Ah, Mr. Armstrong,” she said, breaking into smiles, “now I understand you better. Now, instead of being studiously polite to you, I can——”

“Be politely studious,” chipped in Woodcock. “I see, I see. Very well; that’s settled. Play you draughts?”

“All right.”

“And I can smoke in the drawing-room?”

“Yes, yes; you can smoke anywhere.”

She seemed so pleased that Woodcock could not marry her, and showed her pleasure so plainly, that he replied:

“Thanks. That’s what I was aiming at.”

“How do you mean?”

“Why, I knew that if I voted against your guardian in the matter of marrying you, you would let me smoke in the drawing-room.”

Valentine was a trifle dull, or she would have re-quoted Kipling’s lines about the woman and the good cigar against him. As it was, she could not fathom Woodcock’s subtleties. Neither could Hardwicke; neither could the Governor of the gaol, nor his warders.

In the middle of their game, at which they sat like two children, the dogcart rumbled in at the gate and drew up on the side drive.

“Here’s my luggage,” said Woodcock. “Huff you for not taking me. There! Your move.”

In the exciting progress of the game the luggage was forgotten until Baylis entered the room and announced, with an apologetic, worried look, that there was no luggage, if they understood his meanin’.

“Not come?” cried Woodcock, starting up and nearly upsetting the board.

“No, sir,” returned Baylis, with indignation. “I asked the station-master where it was, and he sez he hadn’t seen nothink of it. Then I asked him what he was there for, and he sez that was his business; and I sez, ‘Wot, to see that luggage don’t come when it ought to come?’ I sez. Then he sez he’d eject me —me, as had spoke so civil! I ups and calls in Jarvis, and me and ’im tells ’im that if ’e didn’t ’ave that there luggage on that there platform by ten o’clock to-morrow mornin’ we’d wire for the Major to come back at once and blow his filthy station to atoms.”

“Ha, ha, ha! And did that weaken him?”

“Ay, it did, sir—it sobered him wonderful; and we both remarked on it to the porters, if you understand my meanin’. As I always sez, sir, w’en the Major’s military other people’s civil. He give me a book for sayin’ that, sir—‘Madras in the ’Forties’—and a very good book, too, sir, so my little niece tells me; she’s just fifteen, and—— Well, as I was sayin’, the luggage—he understands as well as I do, sir, as how that there luggage has got to be on that there platform by ten o’clock in the mornin’; and I hopes you don’t think as I’ve failed in my dooty, sir.”

“Not a bit of it, Baylis. There must have been some mistake at the other end. I’m going up in the morning by the early train, and I’ll see about it.”

“Very well, sir. And I’ll put some of master’s things out in your room for to-night, sir, and tell Jarvis to be ready with the dogcart at eight in the mornin’.”

With that he shuffled off and gave orders to Jarvis, assuring him that he stood as good a chance of a “thick ’un” as anybody living.

Meanwhile the game of draughts came to an end in Valentine’s favour, a result achieved by sheer cleverness on the part of Woodcock. Then she retired on her laurels, feeling that Mr. Armstrong was not such a horrid brute after all. On the contrary, as she was now satisfied that he did not want to marry her, she could afford to regard him as breezy and distinctly amusing.

“Oh, by the way,” she said, pausing at the door after saying good-night, “I spoke to Colonel Smyth-Walton on the ’phone, and he’s coming to dinner to-morrow night. He said he would look forward with great pleasure to seeing you—and still greater to seeing me.”

So, with a laughing good night, she went off, leaving Woodcock smoking his cigar and gazing at the ceiling with an amused expression on his face.

“Colonel Smyth-Walton,” he said, watching the smoke-rings lazily curling on high. “The name seems familiar to me. Ah, I might say almost painfully familiar! When and where I first met Colonel Smyth-Walton I cannot remember, but I think it was in some ancient stone building, where men with keys at their waists went about locking and unlocking doors. ‘Come, step it, 49!’ Ha, ha, ha! How hard is life for many; how easy ’tis for some! Well, well, now I must take that rug over to darling Jack, and hear all about the tramp and the warder, as if I did not know all about them already; and then to-morrow to London for at least some luggage, including a dress-suit for dinner.”

CHAPTER X.

THE RASCAL GOES SHOPPING.

AFTER a good night's sleep, rendered sweet and peaceful by the fact that he had done his best to bed down the fugitive in the fox's den, Woodcock had an early breakfast and went up to London, leaving Jarvis on the road to ruin with the regulation length of throat and a sovereign in his hand.

Long he pondered in the train whether it was worth while packing a number of boxes with specimens of Indian art, old golf-sticks, pughris, tiger skins, and Indian silks, and labelling them "Not wanted on the voyage." But the more he thought of it, the less necessary it seemed. It was far simpler to lose the stuff—all except a small travelling portmanteau—and kick up a great row with the railway officials which would go on till the cows came home, driven by the real Mr. Armstrong. What would happen then was only a little bit of the future, and that as such did not concern Woodcock very greatly. One thing he was certain of, however. The railway officials would never find that luggage, so there would be nothing to give him away. It was pleasant to reflect that, since those boxes were not materially existent, it did not signify greatly whether they were properly locked or correctly labelled. In that respect Woodcock was relieved of much detail. Those ten phantom boxes could go wandering to blessedness in whatever way they chose; and wherever they went their supposed owner would always be on good terms with them.

Woodcock's doings in town were rapid and to the point. First, he wrote and posted several letters to himself at the Grange, addressed in different handwritings. Of course, he must have friends in England. Then he sent himself a wire from the skipper of the boat, saying, "Have your cigar-case safe; leaving it at shipping office. Please call and identify. Kind regards. —WHITTIER." This he left with instructions to send it off at six-thirty, so that it would reach him when Colonel Smyth-Walton was there. He argued that the receipt of the wire at that time would lend verisimilitude to his assumed personality. Then he sought a second-hand clothes dealer, and secured an up-to-date dress-suit that fitted him. This he carried to an establishment near by, where old portmanteaux were for sale. He liked the kind they had in India, so he told the shopkeeper; and, without a word, the seedy-looking individual doddered off, to return in a few moments banging the dust out of an article that

looked as if it had been from China to Peru, gathering labels all the way. He bought it, placed the dress-suit in it, and globe-trotted out. Calling a cab, he made for the nearest shirt-collar-tie-and-stud place, whence after stocking his portmanteau somewhat, he proceeded to a boot shop; and so on till he had all the paraphernalia he required, to say nothing of a few examples of Indian brasswork which he had picked up in Benares, and some half-dozen odds and ends which looked like Aden. Everything else, which he did not think it necessary to burden himself with, was, of course, among the lost luggage.

When all this shopping was done, Woodcock made a bee-line for the station, where he quickly booked his portmanteau. After that he went to the manicurist, and had the finishing-touch put upon his hands. Finally, he sought the station again, took up his luggage, and caught train for Avington, congratulating himself on his free-and-easy day. He had been well aware that his description was known to every policeman in London; but he had no marked physical peculiarities that would give him away, and it was almost inconceivable that any policeman in his senses would couple No. 49, who escaped only two days since, with the well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking Woodcock, with the curly hair, the beautifully-creased grey trousers, the fancy waistcoat, the latest straw hat, the pointed patent-leathers, the gloves, and the gold-knobbed cane. It is true that several times during the day he had come under the roving eye of the police; but with his free-and-easy air he had carried matters off without question, and as deftly as he had carried off Hardwicke's dress-suit and diamond stud.

At Avington he was quite safe. He was getting to be known as the gentleman from India, staying at the Major's; and had any likeness to No. 49 been noticed, no one would have thought of remarking on it. Besides, he reasoned that the warders would aim wide for him, and consequently the safest place was as near the centre of the target as he could get. Had he made for Buenos Ayres or Timbuctoo he would certainly have been stopped; but as he

had merely backed obstinately on to his starting-point, while the electricity played about his supposed flight into the infinite, he smiled to think how well concealed he was.

As he stepped on to the platform at Avington Baylis was there to meet him.

"Take charge of that," he said, handing the portmanteau over to the butler. "It's the one I left at the shipping office. The others haven't arrived yet, I suppose?"

"No, sir, not a sign of 'em, sir; and the station-master tells me they can't trace 'em at the 'ead office neither."

"Well, well, I never did see such bungling as one gets in England! Everybody knows a certain winner, but nobody knows where my luggage is. I suppose the railroad system here is so swift, reliable, and varied that those ten boxes, all marked 'Armstrong, Avington,' are even now being shot out at Banff, or Bideford, or Dungeness, or somewhere in between. Anyhow, they'll have to pay heavy damages if they're lost."

"Ay, they will that, sir," returned Baylis, feeling his way to some of those said damages—"they will that! This way, sir. Jarvis is waiting with the dogcart."

On the way home Woodcock, in answer to Jarvis's very respectful thirst for knowledge, gave him fearful and wonderful accounts of things Indian. Such knowledge as was not to be found in books became Jarvis's; and as he had no preconceived notions on the subject, Woodcock found it easy work. Snakes, alligators, man-eating tigers, mad elephants, and other monsters from the menagerie of Woodcock's brain, prowled and stampeded through his discourse, until Jarvis came to the conclusion that India was the kind of place to send one's mother-in-law for the week-end.

But as soon as they came in sight of the quarries Woodcock's thoughts changed. Hardwicke must be getting hungry, and Woodcock could not bear to think of any one in a tight place—and the fox's den was a very tight place—suffering like that. He was not the man to stand by and see his fellow-mortal starve while he could help him. The thought of Hardwicke recalled No. 49 to his mind. He wondered what had become of that poor fellow, and even put a question to Jarvis on the point.

"Have you heard whether they have found that escaped convict yet?" he asked.

"They ain't caught him yet," returned Jarvis.

"No," chipped in Baylis from the tail of the dogcart; "but they're on his trail. There's a full description of him in this mornin's 'Startler,' with a photigrapht and all. I've got a copy in me pocket."

Woodcock asked to see it, and Baylis handed over the rag. Woodcock, wondering painfully what the photograph was like, turned it up, and was immediately relieved. He could just recognise himself in the villainous reproduction, but that was all. It was doubtful whether anyone else would see a likeness.

Rapidly he scanned through the short article devoted to him. It gave an exciting account of the chase, but beyond that it was all guesswork and theory. Not only the convict, but one of the warders also had completely disappeared, and it was thought that the former had murdered the latter and concealed the body. His description was accurate enough, but the only distinctive point on which great stress was laid was the broken front tooth. Woodcock wondered if the dentist who had supplied him with the new tooth would remember him sufficiently to have his suspicions aroused. In any case, it did not matter greatly, as he had given neither name nor address; and, besides, the chances were that the man might never read about No. 49 in the papers.

"It doesn't look as if they will ever catch him," said Woodcock, handing back the paper to Baylis.

"No sir, it don't at present; but they're bound to get him sooner or later, if you understand my meanin'. He can't hide for ever; an', then, he must 'ave food. It's a poor game, escapin' from gaol with prison clothes on yer back and no money in yer pocket. Now what would you do under such circumstances, sir?"

The question rather took Woodcock aback; but he replied, evenly:

"I'd make straight for the coast, and get a position as stowaway on some outgoing sailing craft."

Baylis looked at him pityingly and shook his head.

"I'm afraid you'd make a poor hand at it, sir, if you understand my meanin'. You'd be caught before you got half a mile."

"Well, Baylis," said Woodcock, with a smile, "in case I ever get into gaol and want to escape, just give me an idea how to do it successfully."

"I've often thought of it," said Baylis, "and I know what I'd do. I'd time my escape on the evenin' of a fancy-dress ball, and I'd escape straight to that. Then I'd have a dance or two in the character of an escaped convict, see? But I wouldn't wait till the warders came up. I'd try and swop clothes with someone; and if I couldn't bring that off, I'd call a cab and drive off, and——"

"But what about money?" queried Woodcock.

"Money? Yes, I've thought of that, sir. You see, as soon as I'd 'bezzled the money I'd bury some of it a mile or two away from the gaol, so's I could dig it up again when I got out."

“Why not bury a suit of clothes, too?” asked Woodcock. “Say a fancy-dress costume; it would make matters much easier.”

“Yes, it would that, sir. Well, ’t all events, I’d drive off in the cab, buy a bottle of whisky at the nearest pub, make the driver drunk, change clothes with him, put ’im inside, and drive off to goodness knows.”

“A very good scheme, Baylis,” commented Woodcock, as they turned in at the Grange gates; “but I hope you’ll never have to adopt it.”

“Not me, sir. I ain’t never been in gaol yet, sir, and I ’ope I never shall.”

“That’s right, Baylis; it’s a horrible place—so I’ve heard.”

The dogcart drew up at the front steps, and, followed by Baylis with the portmanteau, Woodcock went in to dress for dinner, and for close inspection by Colonel Smyth-Walton, the Governor of the gaol.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ODD DINNER PARTY.

WOODCOCK tried hard to make an opportunity to take some mental and material comfort to darling Jack in the fox's den, but things seemed to get in his way. One of his shirt studs broke, and he had to wait while Baylis unearthed some of the Major's. Then one of the buttons of his waistcoat was announced to be missing. He remembered now exactly how he had lost it—at a game of blindman's buff on board the ship. One of the girls had caught him by the waistcoat button, and he had fled, leaving the button in her hand.

But this did not mend it nor sew it on; and while Baylis was performing that office Woodcock gave himself up to feelings of deep consideration for the unfortunate usurper of the fox's den. It was hard, he thought, very hard, that after he had helped him so much he should now be denied the privilege of taking him something to eat when he must be nearly starving. But it was impossible. The guest would come along any minute; and, besides, the first gong for dinner had already sounded. Poor Hardwicke must wait till late at night before Woodcock could get across to him, like a messenger of good tidings. There was one thing, however. Darling Jack would have plenty of time to practise the nimble feat of getting to earth in three seconds, and Woodcock fully expected something like perfection in this particular branch of troglodyte life.

Meanwhile Valentine, overcome with melancholy, weary with hope deferred, and wishing she were dead, was sitting at the piano, playing a dreamy waltz that she and Jack had often danced to. The window was open towards the quarries, and sound carried far in the quiet summer air. Hardwicke, sitting despairingly just outside his den, heard it faintly across the intervening space and was seized with the spirit of restlessness. He was so near, and yet so far. His feelings were like those of the snake that is charmed out of its hole by sweet sounds. But, unlike the snake, he refused to budge. He knew he would be seen, and to be seen was to be captured; and he didn't quite see the force of moving out of one place, where he was paying no rent nor taxes, to go to another where he would enjoy similar advantages. Yet he was getting restless beyond words, and hungry beyond swear words. He trusted his kind friend would come to him as soon as it was dark enough. If he did not, he scarcely

knew what would happen.

Oh, that waltz! It recalled things that were so different to his present position. He could not stand it, and it was a relief when another sound arose and drowned the music. It was the sound of a motor. It grew louder as it approached along the road; then, finally, it stopped at the Grange gates.

"There's that infernal blackguard, Armstrong," said Hardwicke, grinding his teeth, "coming home to dinner, curse him! Dinner—at which he will sit opposite my Valentine, and look at her with his bleary eyes. Ugh! I'll strangle the brute if I get hold of him."

But, of course, it was not Armstrong. It was Colonel Smyth-Walton, the Governor of the gaol, with the aggressive moustache and the full-blooded nose, upon which the heavy eyebrows frowned down in stern disapproval.

Valentine, who had stopped her waltz at his knock, was waiting in the drawing-room to receive him. The little Colonel came in shooting his cuffs; he was no shot in other ways, on account of his short-sightedness. He advanced gravely and quietly, with the manner of an apologetic little man who didn't want to be there. Then he spoke, and it was in the tone of voice in which one would say, "The battalion will wheel into line!"

"And how are you, Miss Woods?" he cried, taking her hand, and looking as pleasant as a court-martial. "You're not melted away this weather, I hope? Ha, ha, ha! Not a bit of it! Why, you look as cool as a—a—a—— No; you're not a bit like a cucumber, Miss Woods."

Valentine laughed.

"You were almost saying it, Colonel," she said.

"Oh, no, no, no! Tut, tut, tut! A cucumber, indeed! Why, I was thinking of something far more beautiful; but, you know—ah—I always forget the simile when the original is present."

Here he fixed his monocle and bored hard into Valentine's inmost soul, to see if his neat compliment was understood or if it required watering down.

"I'm pleased to know I'm more beautiful than a cucumber," laughed Valentine. "How jealous all the vegetable marrow tribe will be when they hear

of it!”

At this moment, just as the conversation was becoming foolish, as it invariably did when the Colonel was left alone with anything feminine, Woodcock entered. Both turned towards him.

“Oh, Colonel,” said Valentine, “this is Mr. Armstrong, from India. Colonel Smyth-Walton, Mr. Armstrong.”

The Colonel extended one hand to Woodcock, and with the other screwed his monocle further into his eye.

“Ah, Mr. Armstrong, this is a pleasure, indeed!” he said. “And how is dear old India, eh?”

“Oh, thirsty,” replied Woodcock. “It’s a hot, polo-ridden country, with a nutmeg liver.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” The laugh died down into a stare. “By the way, Mr. Armstrong, I seem to know your face. It seems—er—familiar to me.”

Woodcock met his eye quietly.

“Not in England,” he said. “Have you ever been in India?”

“No, never. Egypt’s as far East as I ever got.”

“Ah, then I’m like some one you’ve met, I expect.”

“That’s it; but I can’t quite recall where or when.” And the Colonel still stared hard.

The moment was drawing rather tight around Woodcock, and he hastened to change the subject by imperceptible stages.

“It’s a strange thing that in so many millions of people one doesn’t find more faces alike,” he said. “And yet I never remember seeing two that might have been mistaken for each other. Yes, I do, though. Up in the Punjab I knew a man we used to call Bernard Shaw; he was the exact resemblance of that individual. But in looks only. He used to eat a pound of steak at each meal, and his general air was humble and apologetic, as if he was really sorry for all the plays and books he’d written. He used to say kind, nice things, too, and everybody liked him. So marked were these traits that—would you believe it?—when I last saw him he had almost lived down the resemblance.”

The Colonel smiled, and his eyes twinkled. It reminded him of things.

“Ah, I have a double myself,” he said. “We’ve never met, but they say we’re exactly alike. But he must be a man of quite a large acquaintance, for when I’m in town a great many people that I’ve no knowledge of stop me and inquire after my wife’s poor lungs. Now, my wife hasn’t got any lungs—I mean I haven’t got any wife, so it’s distinctly annoying.”

Woodcock admitted that it was, but suggested that perhaps the Colonel’s

large circle of friends annoyed the other man in the same way, asking him when he was going to return that book or what he had done with the umbrella.

But at this moment they were summoned to dinner, and the Colonel had no opportunity of weighing up the remark. The one word “dinner” seemed to banish all lesser considerations from his soul. Woodcock walked behind him on the way to the dining-room, marvelling greatly how the order of things had been reversed. He had been the Colonel’s guest for three years; and now, by the kaleidoscopic turn of events, the Colonel was, in a sense, his guest. What could he do to amuse him? How could he make a suitable return for the three years of hospitality he owed him? He wished he could take him out in the garden and show him a big heap of stones, and say to him, “Guardians, vestrymen, and County Councillors have all been promised this job; but, as you gave me work when I had nothing to do, and were so sorry when I left, you can have the contract. Begin as soon as you like; and when you’ve been hungry a long time you’ll find plenty of skilly inside. No thanks, please; one good turn deserves another.”

He thought all this into the back of the Colonel’s neck as he followed him, making faces at him in his heart, like a wicked little street boy.

“Have a good voyage over?” asked the Colonel, as they took their seats at the table.

“Oh, very fair, as voyages go,” returned Woodcock. “No storms; not even a cyclone or a typhoon.”

“You found it pretty hot in the Red Sea, eh?”

“Oh, beastly hot! And the”—Woodcock was going to say “flies,” but he wasn’t certain of them, so he ran on—“and the heat! They may well call it the Red Sea!”

The colonel looked up from his soup.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it’s red-hot,” returned Woodcock.

“You must excuse Mr. Armstrong,” chipped in Valentine, laughingly, “but he’s always making jokes.”

“Ah, well, we’ll forgive him,” said the Colonel, good-humouredly, “since he’s come such a long way. Er,” he went on, turning to Woodcock, “you didn’t see any siroccos in the Red Sea, I suppose?”

This question happened to Woodcock in a moment of his life either anterior to his knowledge of siroccos or posterior to his recollection of them. At all events, he hadn’t the smallest notion what they were. But he made a guess.

“No,” he replied, “not one. Only the ordinary seagulls and albatrosses.”

The Colonel set down his spoon and stared.

“Seagulls and albatrosses!” he said. “I said sirocco—the wind, you know.”

“I heard what you said, Colonel,” remarked Woodcock, suavely, realising that he’d made a mistake; but his invention was equal to the occasion. “Keep your tresses on, I beseech you,” he continued. “Don’t you know what seagulls and albatrosses are?”

“I think I do,” replied the Colonel, doggedly. “They’re birds, sir, birds.”

“Nothing of the sort,” said Woodcock, in a lofty way. “Ah, but you’ve never been to Bombay. How should you know? And yet I thought the expression was universal. Seagulls and albatrosses are those little gusts that arise apparently from nowhere and whisk along the surface of the sea like that. Pht! pht!” Woodcock here knocked over a glass in one direction, and scattered a spoon and a fork in another. “The little ones are called seagulls and the big ones albatrosses. See?”

“Ah, now I follow you,” said the Colonel. “Cat’s-paws; I see.”

“Precisely; cat’s-paws, as our sailors call them. Now tell us about this sirocco. How does it go?”

This put the Colonel in a better temper. He had once been in a sirocco, and he was never tired of narrating the adventure. He told Woodcock and Valentine exactly how it went, until Woodcock began to imagine that the horror of it had turned the Colonel’s nose red in a single night.

After that, as the wine began to flow a little, the Colonel told some of his Egyptian stories, and Woodcock replied with the haschisch incident he had related to Valentine. This had a wonderful effect on the Colonel, for he happened to know the very place. He got quite friendly over the point; and after comparing notes on it, and describing the various people they had seen in common, they seemed to understand each other better. And by the time that Valentine had left them to their cigars, and the best that Baylis could find in the cellar, the Colonel was addressing Woodcock as “Armstrong” and “my dear boy,” and so forth.

“By the way,” he said, when the wine had been pronounced good for the third or fourth time, “are you any relation to the Armstrongs, the gun people?”

“Well,” returned Woodcock, deprecatingly, “the gun people claim a relationship, but really there is nothing in it except the bare similarity of names. You see, among so many millions of human beings there are not enough names to go round.”

“Exactly; just as you were saying about faces before dinner. I wish I could remember who it is that you remind me of.”

He looked at Woodcock, puzzling his brain; and Woodcock looked back at him, trying hard to think of something that would lead him off the dangerous subject.

“Talking of resemblances,” he began, “reminds me of a tiger hunt that”——

But there he was interrupted by the descent of the Colonel’s fist upon the table, and the ejaculation, “By Jove! I’ve got it!”

Woodcock felt a sudden panic in his feet, and glanced at the window to see if there was a clear way there; but he did not start violently, as people do in novels.

“Got what?” he asked, laughing. “Measles?”

“No; the man you’re like. Ha, ha, ha! Extraordinary!”

The colonel leaned back in his chair and laughed loud and long. As soon as there was a lull Woodcock said:

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t tell me he was a clergyman, or a moneylender, or anything of that kind.”

“No, no,” replied the Colonel, trying to calm himself. “Better than that.”

“You don’t mean to say he was an insurance agent?”

“Ha, ha, ha! You’d never guess, and I hardly like to tell you; it’s so ridiculous.”

“Nonsense! Tell me. I promise you I won’t feel hurt, even if he was the rates and taxes man.”

“You won’t be offended?”

“Not in the slightest, I give you my word.”

“Well, the man you reminded me of was a prisoner who lately escaped from the gaol. Absurd, isn’t it?”

“It’s more than absurd,” said Woodcock, without a vestige of a smile.

“Now, now, my dear boy,” urged the Colonel, quickly. “You promised me not to be offended.”

“So I did,” admitted Woodcock; “but to be told that one looks like a gaol-bird is a little—er—well, to say the least of it”——

“Tut, tut, tut, my dear boy!” broke in the Colonel. “I didn’t mean to infer that. Nothing was further from my mind. It was only a joke played on me by my imagination. If you like, you can say that I remind you of Billington, the hangman.”

“And you won’t be offended?”

“Offended? No.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Well, that’s just what I was going to say.”

The colonel glared at him.

“D’you mean that?” he said.

“Tut, tut, tut, my dear boy!” returned Woodcock. “It was only a joke played on me by my imagination.”

“Of course, of course: only your nonsense. You’re not offended; neither am I. Shake hands, old boy.”

“Right you are;” and they shook hands, better friends than ever.

There was a silence for some moments, in which both men drank their wine and looked to their cigars. The Colonel was thinking how much better it

would have been if he had kept the fancied resemblance to No. 49 to himself. Such things only left nasty flavours. Woodcock, on his part, was preparing the biggest lie that had ever come his way.

"Talking of convicts," he said, presently, when it was mature, "I've never been inside an English prison. I should awfully like to see one."

"Certainly, my dear fellow, certainly," replied the Colonel, only too anxious to grant any favour. "Any time you like. It's a nice drive over the moor in the afternoon"——

"Thanks very much. I think I should prefer the evening, when the prisoners have finished their work and are sitting over their pipes and their beer."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Colonel. "D'you think we let them smoke and drink? Not much!"

"Well, well, I suppose I'm rather ignorant on these matters. Now I come to think of it, I don't suppose the poor devils get many of the luxuries of life, after all."

"Not many. What day will you come?"

"To-morrow, if you are agreeable."

"Sunday. Yes; very good day. You'll see them all to advantage then. Come over in the afternoon at about four, and you'll be in time for tea."

"Thanks, awfully. But look here, Colonel, your—what do you call them?—warders won't be mistaking me for the escaped prisoner and trying to lock me up, eh?"

The Colonel laughed good-humouredly and waved the suggestion away.

"If they dare to imagine any such resemblance," he said, "I'll have them locked up."

Shortly afterwards they rose from the table and joined Valentine in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT VALENTINE SAW.

IT was after nine o'clock. As a night breeze had come up, and the Colonel was nearly as bald as a badger would be if it had no hair, Valentine thoughtfully shut down the window as he came into the drawing-room with Woodcock. But as there was none except the inhabitants of the stars to look in on them, she did not trouble to draw the blind.

"Oh, Colonel," she said, turning away from the window, "do let us have a game of bridge!"

The Colonel said that nothing would give him greater pleasure, but Woodcock was sorry to say he didn't know how to play the game. It was not popular in India, he said. So many suicides had resulted from it that he had decided at an early age not to learn it. Clergymen's wives and army officers had flung themselves into the Indus simply and solely because, through losses at bridge, they had not enough money left for burial expenses. It was the crying evil of India. No, he couldn't play bridge—he had kept off it. But whist—now, that was a different thing. Whist—yes, by all means.

The Colonel and Valentine looked at each other in surprise at Woodcock's voluble disclaimer, and he wondered if he had overdone it.

"I never heard of a suicide in England through bridge," said the Colonel.

"Ah, but the climate's so different in India!" replied Woodcock, quickly. "You see, there's so little to live for there, and the rivers are so deep and clear and tempting, and what with alligators and things, it's so soon over."

"Ugh!" said Valentine, shuddering. "Please don't, Mr. Armstrong! Let us play ordinary whist, then, with a dummy."

So it was agreed, and Woodcock felt that he had satisfactorily explained his ignorance of bridge. Valentine produced a couple of packs of cards, and very soon they were seated round a small table, absorbed in the game. They were sitting near the window, Valentine and Woodcock almost facing it at different angles, and the Colonel with his back to it.

"You don't feel a draught from the window, do you, Colonel?" asked Valentine. "I'll draw the blind if you do."

"Not a bit," said the Colonel, who seemed to have a good hand. "It's Armstrong and his friend the dummy who will feel a draught presently. Come

on. Your lead, dear boy."

The game proceeded, and Woodcock and his inanimate partner found themselves decidedly in a draught. Valentine gathered in the tricks with merry banter, and Woodcock smiled as he realised that he was five tricks under.

"Ha, ha!" roared the Colonel. "I thought it was bridge that wasn't your game, dear boy?"

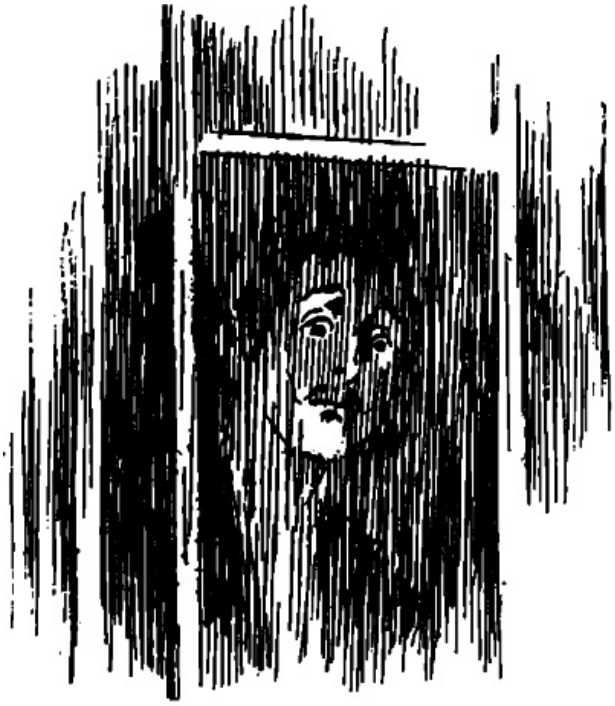
"So it isn't," replied Woodcock, ambiguously. It was the first hand he had played for three years, and he hadn't played it well. But he was no novice, and during the next hand he picked up the thread of the game where he had dropped it long since, and scored three tricks.

"The draught's on you now, Colonel," he said.

"Ah, never fear, my boy," was the reply. "I shan't catch cold."

But a few minutes later, when Woodcock scored two more tricks, making it game all, he admitted that Woodcock knew something about whist.

"Now for the rubber," cried Valentine, getting excited.



But no sooner had the game been started and clubs were going round a second time, than a strange thing happened. Valentine paused in the act of playing a card, with her eyes fixed on the window. She paused so long that both men turned to her, and they saw an expression of surprised delight appear on her face; but it disappeared in a second, and gave place to a look of fright, almost of horror. Woodcock's eyes swiftly sought the window. There, to his consternation, he saw the face of Hardwicke, pale and haggard. In an instant it was withdrawn. Then, before the Colonel could wheel round to see the object of Valentine's frightened looks, she gave a groan, threw out her hands helplessly, scattering her cards, and fell sideways from her chair,

in a dead faint.

Woodcock caught her, and the Colonel sprang to his assistance.

“Water, Colonel—water, quick!” cried Woodcock, gathering Valentine up and laying her flat on the carpet.

The Colonel dashed to a side table, snatched a jug of water, and then, springing to the girl’s side, sprinkled her face.

“What is it?” he asked quickly, turning to Woodcock.

“A man,” replied Woodcock—“a man looking in. Clean-shaven man, something like myself.”

“What?” cried the Colonel, raising himself on his knees and looking at Woodcock. “Like you?”

“Yes,” returned Woodcock, vigorously chafing Valentine’s hands. “I wonder if it was that escaped prisoner of yours? For the moment I thought I was looking at myself in the glass, it was so like me.”

“It’s the man, without a doubt,” cried the Colonel, hurriedly dashing some water on Valentine’s face and getting up. “Egad, we must give chase as soon as we’ve pulled her round!”

“I’m with you,” said Woodcock; and he ran to the electric bell and pressed the button.

Baylis appeared, and stood aghast at the sight of the two men trying to restore his mistress.

“Lord ’a’ mercy, sir!” he cried, addressing Woodcock. “What’s happened?”

“Your mistress has fainted,” returned Woodcock, then added, quickly,

“No. 49 showed his face at the window. Have you a couple of revolvers in the house, Baylis?”

“Ah, yes,” put in the Colonel, hurriedly. “Revolvers! Don’t wait for explanations; get them quick, man!”

Thus admonished, Baylis shuffled off, muttering, and presently returned with a case that the Major always kept on his library table. By this time Valentine was sufficiently recovered to be handed over to the care of Baylis, while Woodcock and the Colonel, each in possession of a weapon, rushed from the room.

“Which way did he go?” asked the Colonel, excitedly, as they debouched at the front door.

“That way,” returned Woodcock, pointing in a direction which, by circumnavigation of the globe, would ultimately lead to the quarries. “He bolted straight down there, into the garden. Come on; we ought to spot him in the open, with this moon.”

Woodcock headed down the garden in the direction of the stream that bounded it from the open moor. He knew that Hardwicke would certainly have taken the opposite direction, so as to reach his fox’s den. Accordingly, his object was to lead the Colonel as far afield as possible.

“Come on!” he cried, in a hoarse whisper, as the Colonel puffed along by his side. “Keep your eyes open; he may spring out from behind a tree.”

“I only hope he does,” panted the Colonel.

But they neared the end of the garden by the great pear-tree without encountering anyone.

“Let’s get beyond the trees,” cried the Colonel; and he made a sudden dash, revolver in hand.

Woodcock held back. He was just going to sing out “Mind the stream!” when the devil got hold of his tongue and tied it back. In another moment there was a loud splash, the report of a revolver, and a spluttered string of swear words, ending in a gurgle. Then, in the silence which followed, a large pear fell from the tree, shot through the heart.

Woodcock laughed. He felt safe in doing so. He knew the stream was deep just there, and it is difficult to hear under water. He stepped forward and stood on the edge of the bank. In a second or two sounds of struggling, splashing, and spluttering were heard near by.

“Help! Help!” cried the despairing voice of the Colonel. He evidently couldn’t swim. Indeed, he was sinking a second time; but as he went down the hand which held the revolver lingered a moment above the surface, the finger working the trigger

spasmodically. The result was four or five shots in rapid succession, the last detonating with a dull commotion beneath the water.

Immediately there was a shout from the house, and Jarvis, followed by Baylis, came pelting down the garden, like reinforcements to a battle. The foremost reached the bank just as Woodcock, having divested himself of his coat, was plunging in to the Colonel's assistance. Then, as Baylis came lumbering up, panting, and the pair stood gazing at the dark surface of the water, Woodcock reappeared with a bald-headed military bundle in his arms, and, struggling to the bank with it, cried:

"Here, lend a hand! Haul him up, and lay him out."

"Right, sir," returned Jarvis, bending down and catching the Colonel under the arms.

"Love a dyin' duck!" said Baylis, trying to assist him. "He's shot hisself, if you understand my meanin'."

Between them they hauled the Colonel out and laid him on the grass, where he gurgled slightly. Then, as if he had some idea he was fighting for his country, he fired the last shot in the revolver with his hand stretched out on the grass, and after that he lay still. It was the final twitch; but it nearly killed Jarvis.

"Take care; he's dangerous!" cried Woodcock; and pouncing on the revolver, he wrenched it

away. “Now for first aid. Artificial respiration. Turn him over, Jarvis, and I’ll up-end him and empty the water out of his lungs. Baylis, go and get some brandy, quick!”

Baylis hurried off, while Woodcock and Jarvis undertook the work of resuscitation.

“Is he dead, sir?” asked Jarvis, in an awestruck whisper.

“Dead? No!” returned Woodcock, half-laughing, for the whole incident had amused him tremendously. “He’ll soon come round;” and he plied artificial respiration with a will.

A groan from the Colonel confirmed his words, and Woodcock worked harder. Presently something that sounded like a steam-roller drawn by an elephant came down the garden. It was Baylis with the brandy. Woodcock snatched the bottle, and poured some down the Colonel’s throat. Then he sat back and took a long pull himself, for the stream had chilled him.

The Colonel groaned; then he sat up and shivered.

“Has he escaped?” he asked, feebly.

“Yes, he’s gone,” returned Woodcock, “and you’ve nearly drowned yourself. You’d better come into the house. Can you walk?”

“Yes, I think so.” He struggled to his feet and staggered about; but Woodcock took him by one arm and Jarvis by the other, and so they made their way up the garden, with Baylis breathing heavily in the rear.

When both men had taken a hot bath and changed their clothes, the Colonel wearing a suit of the Major’s, double-reefed as to the trousers and sleeves, they came down to the drawing-room, where they found Valentine, conscious but disconsolate.

“Poor Colonel!” she said. “How are you feeling now?”

“A little shaken,” he replied. “I shouldn’t mind if we could only have caught the beggar.”

“What beggar?” asked Valentine, looking up with a sorrowful but puzzled air.

“Why, the man who escaped from the gaol—the man you saw looking in at the window. No wonder you fainted; it must have been a shock!”

“I—I don’t quite——” began Valentine; but she got no further, for Woodcock, seeing what was coming, deliberately tipped over a small table on which stood a heavy vase containing an aspidistra. The vase crashed on the floor and broke.

“Good gracious!” cried Woodcock. “How clumsy of me!”

“Never mind,” said Valentine. “It was an accident;” and she pressed the bell for Baylis to see to the thing.

“Well, as it’s a night of accidents, we may as well do the thing thoroughly,” said Woodcock, with a crestfallen air. “But, all the same, I’m beastly sorry.”

During this little digression, Valentine had time to think, and she came to the conclusion that she would keep the identity of the face at the window to herself. She had her own views of the matter, as will presently appear. For the moment she merely poured out some strong black coffee in silence, but with a trembling hand. With a liberal addition of brandy, this restorative brought back Woodcock’s sense of humour and warmed the cockles of the Colonel’s heart.

“Armstrong,” he said, leaning forward and placing his hand on Woodcock’s knee—“Armstrong, old man, you’ve saved my life, you have, and I want to say that I shall be eternally grateful.”

“Nonsense!” returned Woodcock. “I only pulled you out of a puddle, that was all.”

“Ah, yes; but I should have been drowned, for all that, if you hadn’t brought me round,” persisted the Colonel.

“Yes, sir, I can bear witness to that, sir,” put in the privileged Baylis, looking up from the débris of the vase. “It was the artificial perspiration wot done it, sir.”

This was greeted with some laughter. Even Valentine smiled faintly. Baylis, on his knees, stared with a puzzled expression.

“I said it was the artificial perspiration, if you understand my meanin’,” he reiterated.

“Quite right, Baylis,” said Woodcock. “Quite right. The stream was deuced cold, and perspiration was the only thing.”

“Yes, sir, it was that, sir,” said Baylis, getting on with his work. “And you done it grandly, sir.”

Woodcock felt a hero, and fully understood that if there was anything better than the best in Baylis’s gift, he was sure to get it.

“My word!” said the Colonel, suddenly springing out of his seat. “I must be off. I was forgetting. I must get home as fast as my motor will carry me, and send out some men for that villain; he can’t be very far away. Good night, Miss Woods. Good night, Armstrong. I shall expect you to-morrow afternoon;” and, in a sudden official hurry, he rushed from the room.

“I say, Colonel,” cried Woodcock, hurrying after him. The Colonel paused in the hall, and Woodcock added: “For Heaven’s sake, tell them I’m like him. We don’t want any——”

“You leave it to me,” replied the Colonel.

Woodcock helped him into his coat and saw him off; then he returned to the drawing-room.

“My word!” he said, laughing. “You should have seen him when we got him to the bank. Oh, it was funny!”

But Valentine did not join in his mirth. She seemed to have something on her mind. Woodcock saw it and paused.

“What is the matter?” he asked, quietly.

“I’ve had a great shock, Mr. Armstrong,” she replied, rising and standing with one elbow on the mantelpiece. “A great shock.”

“What is it?” he asked again.

There was a long pause. Then she said, slowly and with an effort:

“Have you ever heard of people when they die appearing to those they—they are very fond of—just for a moment, and then vanishing?”

Woodcock was taken aback. In a flash he saw that Valentine imagined she had seen a ghost. He turned away to hide a mental “Strike me pink! Here’s a lark!” Then an idea occurred to him.

“I’ve heard of it,” he said, turning a very solemn face to her; “but I believe there’s a lot of fairy tale about it. Do you mean that it wasn’t Convict 49 whose face appeared at the window, but someone you’re very fond of—I mean who’s very fond of you?”

“Yes, I mean that,” she said, looking into the empty grate. “His face was haggard and ill. Oh, I know he is dead; I’m sure of it.”

“Don’t you believe it,” said Woodcock. “Your mind was running on a certain face, and when a face appeared at the window you naturally thought it was the face. But it wasn’t. I saw it as well as you, Miss Valentine, and it didn’t look the sort of face that—— Well, if you ask me, it was the face of a man flying from justice.”

At this Valentine wrung her hands and moaned. Could her darling Jack be flying from justice? Had she been mistaken in the face? No—a thousand times no! It was Jack, and no other. He was dead, and had appeared to her. How otherwise could she interpret his eloquent silence for the past few days? He had probably fallen over a cliff and broken his leg, and, after lingering there till an hour ago, had died of pain and starvation. Oh, the thought of it was too terrible! She rose from her seat, and, bursting into tears, left the room.

“My!” said Woodcock, looking at the door as it closed behind her. “This is getting a bit thick! I must go and confer with darling Jack, and take him some food, by Jove! I expect that’s why he showed up. He was hungry. I’ll get Baylis to bring me up a good big cold supper. That’s the idea;” and he rang the bell.

Now, Woodcock, although he informed Baylis that he was ravenously hungry, scarcely touched the luxurious supper that was brought up to him on a tray. As soon as he had dallied over it a reasonable time, he wrapped the choicest portions in paper, and, leaving evidence of an enormous appetite behind him, went out and hurried across to the quarries.

He had rather a difficult part to play. It was, as he had remarked, “getting a bit thick.” In the first place, he had to remember that, although he had told Hardwicke he had informed Valentine about his accident and his aunt, he had in reality never mentioned Hardwicke at all to her. If he didn’t fall into the soup over that double misunderstanding, he would certainly have some difficulty in making it clear to Hardwicke how on earth he had explained to Valentine that, although Hardwicke was ill in bed miles and miles away, he was still able to show his face at the window.

Overcome by these and other difficulties, he paused in the middle of the field, considering. Then suddenly a bright idea occurred to him, and he set himself down at once as a genius for having thought of it. It was the sort of idea that wouldn’t have occurred to one man in a million, it was so simple and masterly. It was to tell the truth about the whole incident, disguising only certain bald facts.

With this inspiration shedding daylight on his mind, he hurried on, and soon reached the outskirts of the quarries. Softly whistling the “life-cherishing” air, he made his way down the side of the pit to the fox’s den.

“Are you there?” he whispered, hoarsely, when he had pushed through the bushes.

“Yes,” replied a voice from the hole in the rock. “I’m almost starved, but still alive and kicking.”

“Kicking isn’t in the bargain,” said Woodcock. “I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t possibly get to you before.”

“I didn’t mean that,” returned Hardwicke, coming out of his den. “I wouldn’t kick you for worlds. You’ve brought me something to eat?”

“Yes, heaps. Here you are.”

He placed the paper parcel on the ground, and Hardwicke made a rapid onslaught. The sheep that bleats loses a mouthful; accordingly no word passed his lips for at least ten minutes, during which time Woodcock sat on a stone and smoked, and reviewed the position very methodically. At last Hardwicke found opportunity for words.

“I suppose you were there to dinner?” he asked, looking up.

“Yes.”

“And who was the other chap? Not that brute Armstrong?”

“No; Armstrong’s up in town till to-morrow night. It was the Governor of the gaol. You’ve made a nice mess of it, you know.”

“Couldn’t help it,” returned Hardwicke, apologetically. “I only wanted one look at her; but I never thought she’d see me.”

“Well I suppose you know the result?” said Woodcock.

“No. What? Tell me, quick! Did anything happen?”

Then Woodcock gave him a graphic account of the whole affair, from Valentine’s sudden faint up to the resuscitation of the Colonel. Hardwicke was truly contrite for the trouble he had caused to Valentine. He did not seem to be sorry for the double ducking in the cold stream; but that may have been because Woodcock told the story in a jocular style, with the comedy on the Colonel.

“I was a fool!” he said. “But she’s all right now?”

“Well, I don’t know that she is. You see, she thinks you are ill in bed at your aunt’s house miles and miles away, and she has come to the only conclusion possible under the circumstances.”

“What conclusion? Tell me. What conclusion?”

“Why, that you’re dead, and that she’s seen your ghost.”

“Gracious Heaven!” gasped Hardwicke. “And couldn’t you disabuse her mind of the idea?”

“How could I? I’d told her you were very ill, and all that. What was I to say? That you’d come all the way to look in at the window, and then vanish? No; hers was the only explanation that anyone could possibly arrive at under the circumstances.”

“Yes; perhaps you’re right. Well, now I think the best thing is to tell her the plain truth.”

“What?” cried Woodcock, starting up. “That’s rough on me, after all I’ve done. I’ve got to go to her, and say, ‘Look here: I’m a liar!’ Not much!”

“Yes, I see your point,” admitted Hardwicke. “It’s unfortunate—very unfortunate.”

“But I’ll tell you what we can do,” suggested Woodcock.

“What can we do?” Hardwicke leaned forward eagerly.

“Well, you’re a ghost, you know, and—and I’m not a bad medium.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, I’ll hold a séance with her, and we’ll materialize your spirit. See? Then you can see her and talk with her. Yes, you could come every evening then, with the lights turned down, if you only made your entry in the proper way.”

Woodcock spoke eagerly. It was just the sort of thing that appealed to him. Hardwicke laughed. It was a bright idea; but—but there were drawbacks in it.

“She would soon see that I was flesh and blood,” objected Hardwicke. “Besides, if she really believed I was a ghost, it would frighten her to death, and then——”

“And then there’d be two of you,” chipped in Woodcock. “Yes; but it’s a pity it couldn’t be carried out. There are such large possibilities in it. Well, there’s another matter. The Governor of the gaol left half an hour ago in his motor to despatch some warders to search in the neighbourhood of the Grange, and it’s just possible they may search here. You must lie very low, and clear away all signs of your cannibal feast. If they find you, of course they’ll tell the police, and then it’s all up. By the way, did you encounter any of the detectives on your travels?”

“No; I saw no one at all.”

“That’s strange, but I suppose they’re watching the road corners for your motor. Perhaps they’re having a night off. I don’t think they have the smallest idea that you’re so near. I think if you lie very close for another four or five days you’ll be safe.”

Hardwicke groaned.

“Don’t do that,” said Woodcock. “They’ll hear you. I must get off now, as

I want to be there to put the warders on a wrong scent as soon as they come."

Having enjoined discretion, as well as practice in speedy disappearance, on Hardwicke, Woodcock made off in some haste, for his eagerness to put the warders on the wrong scent was perfectly real. It did not suit his book at all that Hardwicke should be unearthed just yet.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RASCAL GOES BACK TO GAOL.

THE next morning was Sunday. Woodcock awoke with a smile which, as he sat up in bed, developed into a grin, and at last reached the maturity of a chuckle. He remembered having set the warders on the track of the fugitive in the twenty-four thousand mile direction, and had dreamed that the Colonel, sword in teeth and revolver in hand, had run over the edge of Mexico into the Gulf Stream and had been drowned.

Now he reflected with pleasure that the dream was an exaggeration. The Colonel was still alive, and had invited him to the gaol that afternoon. Invited him! He laughed at the idea. Who had a better right than Woodcock to enter that gaol without an invitation? He wondered if the Colonel, out of gratitude for having saved his life, would press him hospitably to remain for three or four years. There was a decided risk in going into that gaol—a risk of not coming out again. Woodcock had felt that when he entered it three years ago. But there had been nothing humorous about it then. Now there was something distinctly funny in it, and—well, he liked risks. Otherwise, he would never have taken it into his head to walk out of the gloomy place.

Valentine did not appear at breakfast that morning. She was too ill. Consequently the letters which Woodcock had sent himself from London were lost upon her. The telegram had apparently been delayed in transmission, for there it was on his plate. Nevertheless, he opened his mail while Baylis was in the room, and made the most of the contents before that trusting individual.

It had rained during the night, and it made Woodcock very happy to think that darling Jack was so fortunate as to have a rock to keep him dry. He was all right for food until night-time. The only thing he lacked was something to drink, and that Woodcock might smuggle over to him during the morning. But Valentine—what about her? Woodcock had a tender heart, and he did not like the idea of the girl crying her eyes out over an unfortunate mistake. It seemed such a waste of eyes. Surely there was some way of stopping her.

As he spiked another egg and erected his newspaper against the coffee-pot, he cast round in his mind for some way in which he could convince Valentine that her lover was still alive, and at the same time keep his whereabouts a close secret. Could he get him to write a letter? No; he had told Hardwicke a tale to the effect that he had told Valentine a tale, which he hadn’t. The letter-writing

might complicate matters.

"Ah!" he muttered to himself. "It would be rather difficult to wangle a letter of that sort. Besides, what about the postmark? H'm! Would a telegram do? That's better. A telegram from, say, Birmingham, giving no other address. I think I could manage that without darling Jack's assistance."

He rang for Baylis, and asked for an A B C. Consulting this, he found that a train that arrived at Avington at eleven o'clock reached Birmingham at half-past three. Valentine would have to cry until about half-past four, after which time she would dry her eyes and listen to Woodcock's persuasions that she only fancied the face outside the window was her lover's.

Breakfast finished, he took a telegraph form, and wrote the following message:

"Miss Woods, The Grange, Avington.—Had accident. Slowly recovering. Doctor says out of danger. Can be with you in five days. Fondest love.

"JACK."

"H'm!" mused Woodcock. "In five days I reckon the Major will be here with the Armstrong chap, and I'll have to scoot." He glanced at his watch, and continued: "Half-past ten. Now for the station."

With the telegram in his pocket, he strolled out along the road that led to Avington. As he went he puffed one of the Major's best Imperiales, and admitted it wasn't bad—for an Imperiale. It was a pity that Hardwicke couldn't smoke. A good cigar would fumigate the fox's den; but it would tickle the noses of casual passers-by, and they might wonder who it was making a noise like a good cigar and go and see. Poor Hardwicke! He was having a rough time, but Woodcock was doing his level best for him.

He reached the station just as the train was signalled. He sauntered along to the point where the guard's van would draw up, and there he waited. The place was almost deserted, except for a few porters and the station-master, who, on recognising him, kept well to the other end, as if he had something of importance to say to the engine-driver. Perhaps he thought that Woodcock had come to meet the Major, who, by all accounts, was going to blow his filthy station to atoms on the matter of the missing luggage.

The train came in. The guard issued from his van, and Woodcock stopped him before he had gone five yards along the platform.

"Morning, guard," he said. "Will you do me a favour? I shall win a small bet by it."

"Certainly, sir," returned the guard. "Certainly. What is it?"

Woodcock placed the telegram in the guard's hand, with half a sovereign on the top of it.

"I want you to send that from Birmingham as soon as you get there."

"Right you are, sir," returned the guard, pocketing the coin with a wink of his mental eye. "I'll see to it. You can rely on me, sir."

"Thanks. I shall lose a couple of quid if you forget it."

"No fear; I shan't forget it. Right away, there! Good morning, sir, and thank you."

He whisked on to the stepping-board as the train moved out, and Woodcock sauntered back to the Grange.

"Baylis, I feel dry," he said, as he encountered that worthy in the hall. "If you can get me a bottle of something good, I'll take a chair and some books down into the garden and sit it out."

"Yes, sir," returned Baylis. "You mustn't go for to take cold after last night, sir. That there stream ain't none o' the warmest, and there's nothing like good wine to warn off a cold, in a manner of speakin'. Will you 'ave champagne, sir, or a bottle of the old port?"

"Both, Baylis. I like 'em mixed. It's a way we have in India. The only way is to drink yourself sober when you've got a cold coming."

Baylis raised his eyebrows; but he was getting used to the funny things that happened in India. If he had been told that every man there must have two glasses to drink out of he would have believed it. But Woodcock was not fastidious. One glass was enough; either he or Hardwicke could drink out of the bottle.

In a few moments he was in possession of the two bottles and a glass. The

cork of the port was drawn, and the champagne was wired. With one in each coat-pocket, two or three books on India under one arm, and a camp-chair under the other, he strolled off down into the garden. Baylis, watching him through the pantry window, shook his head, saying:

" 'Pon my word, he's a marvel, he is! He'll get rid of that cold, but he won't come back as straight as he's going now."

Woodcock sought a concealed spot, where he deposited the camp-chair and the books. Then he cut straight across to the quarries with the bottles.

His meeting with "darling Jack" was short and to the point. A rapid interchange of ideas followed the whistled signal of "Life let us cherish."

"Hello, there! Safe from corroding care?"

"Yes; but the lawful tenant came back at sunrise."

"Who? What? How many? Does he drink?"

"No. I mean the fox."

"Oh, I see. And what did he say when he came?"

"He kept on sayin' nuffin'. He simply sniffed in and sniffed out again, and ——"

"And wondered whose den it really was?"

"I suppose so."

"He didn't raise the question of rent!"

"No. But look here, old man: by your free-and-easy manner——"

"Can't sell it, dear boy, so you can't buy it. It's too useful."

"Tut! You've got good news for me; I can see it in your face."

"Well, I've seen Miss Woods this morning, and convinced her that it was not you who showed up at the window last night, but a convict who'd escaped from the gaol. She wouldn't believe it at first; she said that the face was the face of one flying from justice, but——"

"Well, but what?"

"But—ah!—little she knew how true were her words! Little she knew ——"

“Look here: the fox didn’t moralize when he sniffed in this morning.”

“Yes, yes; and why should I? Well, I convinced her that it was not you.”

“Good enough. And——”

“And my friend, the Governor of the gaol, has sent me an invitation to visit him this afternoon. Shall I put in a word for you?”

“Do, old chap! Say it was someone else; put ’em off the scent——”

“Do you mean prejudice their minds against the peculiar odour of foxes?”

“No; say I went down the other way. Set ’em to search the woods twenty miles away over there; say that—that——”

“That you’re not here; that it was someone else; that it was a fellow named William Jenkins who ran the man down and then jiggered off, like Heliogabalus.”

“Well, well, you know what to say, and I shall be eternally gra——”

“Make it sempiternally, old chap.”

“All right—sempiternally grateful to you if you get me out of this alive.”

“Right; don’t worry. ‘Life let us cherish,’ you know. Already somewhere in space the rope is being made which justice and equity and common law have designed for you. But never fear; I will stand by you. Never fear; all will be well!”

“You are very good to me.”

“Not at all. If ever I’m in your position you’ll do the same for me?”

“With pleasure!”

“H’m! Your face lights up at the prospect; but I suppose you mean——”

“I mean that if ever I get out of this fox’s hole I’ve got myself into, I’ll—I’ll——”

“You’ll ask me to your wedding. Right! I accept.”

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye. And remember I’ve received word that you won’t be able to travel for five days. However, ‘Life let us cherish.’ Toodleoo! Buck up, and go wary!”

When an hour later, he returned, with a steady step, by the way he had gone, Baylis looked forth from the window again, and balanced him up again as a marvel, for he was walking perfectly straight.

At the mid-day meal Woodcock again looked in vain for Valentine. She was still crying her eyes out; but he reflected that a time would come during the afternoon when she would be able to dry her tears with a telegram. He had done all he could, and she must wait.

Punctually at three in the afternoon he set out for the gaol, driven by Jarvis in the dogcart. Woodcock had dressed himself with infinite care. His patent-leather boots shone. His grey suit was spotless; a fresh white rose gleamed in his buttonhole. His collar and the bowler hat were everything that could be desired; and as for his hands, he had spent at least an hour over them, so that they now contained no hint of recent prison life. Add to all this the fact that he had stood another hour before the glass practising a smile that had been foreign to him before, and you have a well-disguised No. 49, returning to the land of his captivity with a small, but piquant, fear of being recognised.

Nevertheless, when they at length reached the thicket at the bend of the road on the other side of Avington, and the incidents of his remarkable escape were brought vividly to his mind, he felt a rising excitement at the foolhardiness of his visit. It was only a few days ago that he had hidden behind that gorse patch, had been fired at by the warder, and had dressed for dinner among the trees. Only a few days since he had stumbled exhausted across the moor in prison garb, and now he was driving back in state, not necessarily coming to his own again, but—well, it was a risky piece of bravado, to say the least of it.

As the dogcart was passing the thicket he could not resist a wish to survey the place and find out if things remained as he had left them.

"Pull up here, Jarvis," he said. "This is something like

a patch of Indian bush. I'm going to have a look at it. Trees are my hobby."

"Yes, sir," returned Jarvis; "and a bit of a spell won't do the mare no 'arm neither, sir."

With this he pulled up, and Woodcock jumped down and made his way into the thicket. No sooner was he out of sight than he hastened to the spot where he had left the valise. It was no longer there.

"Ah," he said, "good job I left nothing worth mentioning! Yes, I did, though—a pair of socks; I remember now. Phew! What price the washing-mark? Well, well, I suppose some tramp got hold of them, and in that case I don't think the washing mark will ever come into evidence. Now for the old well."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER.

ON reaching the spot where he had hurled in the log and his own prison clothes, Woodcock was surprised and somewhat alarmed to find that the place had been the scene of recent operations. It looked as if only on the previous evening the well had been searched. There were fresh footprints round it, and on a slight incline near by there were signs of many buckets having been emptied very recently.

Woodcock stood a moment in silence. Then he said, with a look which ought to have been serious, but which was only comical:

"Love a duck! They've emptied the well in search of the missing warder. They've found my clothes, and they've also found an almost empty valise near by. Inference: I made away with the owner of the valise, dressed up in his clothes, and threw my own down the well. They'll trace the owner of that valise by means of the washing-mark on the socks, if there is one, and in two or three days' time No. 49 will be suspected of murdering John Hardwicke. I'll bet they've searched this place thoroughly for his body! But wait; not so fast, Richard Woodcock! That old sagger of a tramp—did he find the valise? Did he, now? Did he?"

The afternoon sun was westering over the gloomy gaol as the dogcart conveyed Woodcock along the winding road that led over the moor. He smiled

to himself behind Jarvis's back, and winked at the far horizon as if his secret was shared only by him and the offing. He could keep it easily, and as for the offing—well, it did not drink.

Ha, ha! That undulating racecourse that stretched from the gaol to the thicket—how he had stridden it in the first flush of liberty!

Ha, ha! How he had turned his back on gaol and whistling bullets, with a laugh up his sleeve at the following warders, until the humour of it had grown grim, and the only laugh left in him was dear at the price of his skin!

Ha, ha! How he had fooled the surviving warder, and dressed him up in his own clothes, and sent him levanting off to lead a better life in a far-off land, where escaped convicts, having no numbers, are called by their own names in the morning!

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! And now he was returning to the place of his adoption, as merry as a kitten or a giraffe—whichever happens to be handiest. It amused him so immensely that an involuntary chuckle escaped him. Jarvis turned his head at the sound.

"What is the joke, sir?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. I was only thinking how the Major would blow the filthy station to atoms when he learned that the old factotum there hadn't found my luggage."

"Yes, sir," replied Jarvis, with a flick of the whip and a wink of his eye. "Blow the filthy station to atoms is right. I only hope I'm there to see. When the Major's blood's up there's cannons to right of him and cannons to left of him. He'll wheel the battalion into line, and carry on as if he was pushing a million men into battle. He'll give that there Juggins of a station-master and all his porter-swiping porters just three seconds to produce that there luggage, and if he can't do it there'll be just twenty seconds more for variegated language, and then——"

"Well, then?"

"There ain't no words to describe it, sir. As Baylis so haptly remarked, he'll 'blow his filthy station to atoms, if you can grasp my meanin'.' "

Woodcock smiled sweetly to himself. This Major was evidently a character. He was rather looking forward to him.

In due course they reached the gates that led into the gaol. They were opened by a warder whom Woodcock knew well. The man gave a start when he saw him, but immediately, in answer to Woodcock's haughty look, his manner changed, and he saluted respectfully.

"Good!" said Woodcock to himself as they turned in at the gates. "The Colonel's told 'em about my striking likeness to No. 49. He's not a bad sort.

Very hospitable, and all that sort of thing, you know."

He felt immensely pleased as he was being driven towards the gloomy building. The warder who had just saluted him was the very man who had always treated him most harshly. But Woodcock was not vindictive. He would not ask the Colonel to discharge that warder on his face. No; his motto was "Live and let live—or die and be dead."

Leaving Jarvis to amuse himself as best he knew how, he knocked at the door of the governor's quarters, and was admitted by a neat servant, who stared at him somewhat, but proceeded immediately to be doubly respectful.

"Will you come this way, sir?" she said. "The Colonel is expecting you."

"Hello, there!" came a voice from a room beyond a short passage. "Is that you, Armstrong, old boy? Come along. I've been expecting you for half an hour or more. How are you?"

Here the Colonel met him in the doorway, and grasping his hand, shook it vigorously. He had evidently not forgotten that Woodcock had saved his valuable life the night before.

"Well, Colonel, I hope you feel no ill effects of your ducking last night."

"Slight cold in the head, dear boy—a mere nothing. And you?"

"Well, mine's a mild return of the old complaint."

"What's that, dear boy?"

"Hill fever, you know. Once you have it badly it always crops out again if you do anything silly. But it's really nothing serious. Brandy's the only thing that settles it."

"Brandy! Brandy! Well, that's a funny thing! Nothing but brandy does my cold any good."

The Colonel rang the bell—not to order brandy, for there was plenty on the sideboard, but to countermand the order for tea. Tea was an insult to a man who had contracted hill fever in rescuing him from a watery grave.

The maid appeared, bearing the tea-tray in her hands, and was promptly ordered to take it away—to give it to the poor—it was bad for the digestion.

"Now," said the Colonel, when she had withdrawn, "help yourself, dear boy—help yourself."

Whatever feelings Woodcock may have had as he approached and entered the gloomy portals, they quickly gave place to a sense of satisfaction at having braved thus far without mishap. And as the brandy flowed, he seemed to see no possible danger in the situation.

"Any further news of the escaped prisoner?" he asked, when the Colonel and he had chinked glasses for the second time.

“Nothing of much moment, dear boy. My men have been out all night, and two or three of them haven’t returned yet. But those that have come back have brought some striking news. You know the thicket on the moor between here and Avington?”

“You mean the little patch of jungle that we passed on our way here?”

“Yes. Well, that’s the place that No. 49 made for when he escaped.”

“Naturally. The only bit of cover on the whole moor, as far as I can see.”

“Well, you must know that Roberts, one of my warders, reached that spot in pursuit and hasn’t been seen since.”

“Really? What happened to him?”

“Ah, that’s the point. And it was a mystery until this morning. Even now it is only partially cleared up.”

Woodcock leaned forward with the greatest interest on his face. It was not all assumed, for he particularly wanted to know the conclusions which had been drawn from all the rummaging in the thicket. The point which interested him more than anything else was connected with the pair of socks. That word “socks” was the only one in the dictionary that had any real influence over him, for it was intimately connected with washing-marks, and that way lay discovery.

“Well,” he said, “it is something to have the mystery partially cleared up. How does it stand now?”

“In a better light, dear boy. My men searched that thicket—or jungle, as you Indian fellows call it—and found No. 49’s prison clothes and some of the warder’s cartridges. Now, these things tell a tale. At least, they do to me.”

“Do you mean you can form a theory from those slight facts?”

“Certainly, dear boy—certainly. It’s all as plain as a pikestaff.”

“What? You don’t mean to say”—here Woodcock put on an expression of intense thought—“you don’t mean to tell me that No. 43——”

“Forty-nine, dear boy.”

“Beg pardon—49. You don’t mean that he took off his clothes and skedaddled over the bare moor with nothing on?”

“Ha, ha! You’d make a poor detective, Armstrong. That’s not the theory at all. Look here, now: take the three important factors in the case—first, the prison clothes; second, the warder’s cartridges; and third, the missing warder himself. Can’t you see what happened?”

“Blest if I can,” said Woodcock.

“Why, when the warder came up with No. 49 in the thicket there was a struggle. Again and again the warder attempted to insert a cartridge into his

carbine, but every time it was snatched away. Finally, No. 49, being the stronger man, over-powered the other, and having strangled him to death, exchanged clothes and made off. Depend upon it, dear boy, 49 is at present going about disguised as a warder—probably making his way to the sea coast to ship to America, and——"

"And lead a better life in a land where he is unknown." Woodcock could not resist making this remark; it gave him a pleasant tickling in the back of his brain. Seeing, however, that it was more or less lost upon the Colonel, he hastened to add, "But what about the corpse?"

"Ah, that is the mystery. My men are still searching, and I expect any minute to see them come in with it. His poor wife is nearly distracted at his absence; but, of course, I have given every one strict injunctions not to tell her what we fear until we are certain on the point."

"Just as well," said Woodcock. "It's obvious that either he or 46—I mean 49—has no clothes. Maybe it's the warder, and he's in hiding somewhere till his beard grows."

The Colonel laughed, but shook his head.

"I fear poor Roberts is done for," he said. "A desperate villain was 49—a man who would stick at nothing. Shall we replenish?"

Woodcock agreed, on the grounds that his hill fever, though abating, was still too high.

"Here's to you," he said. "By the way, what a pity they didn't find anything else in the thicket—some little thing that would give a clue. For instance, did they find the prisoner's boots?"

"No; only his clothes, dear boy."

"Then he's still got his boots on?"

"Presumably."

"H'm!" mused Woodcock, now feeling hopeful that for some reason or other the valise with the pair of socks had not been discovered. "Did your men search the thicket through?"

"Every inch of it."

"Well, I'm blest!" was Woodcock's inward comment. "I wonder where the deuce those socks went to. I wonder—I wonder if that tramp took them? There's no fear of the washing-mark ever coming into evidence if he did."

"Well, well," he said, addressing the Colonel, "time will show. I only hope the warder will come back alive, and that 49 will be collared."

"Don't you make any mistake," said the Colonel, his nose burning bright beneath his beetling eyebrows. "No. 49 won't get away; and, by Jove! when

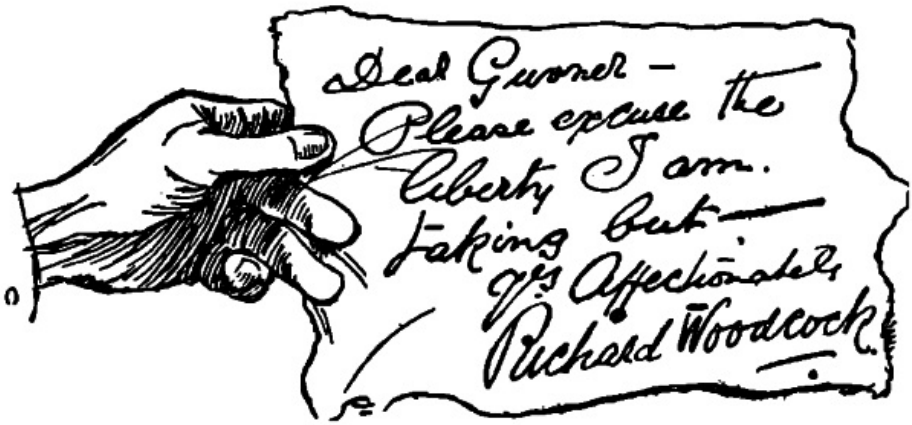
we do get him back he'll have a rough time. I'll teach him! I'll give him something to eat!" And the Colonel rubbed his hands together at the thought of what he would do to 49 when he was brought in. "Gad, sir, what do you think? The cheek of the fellow! Never in all my born days——"

He rose and unlocked a drawer in his writing-desk, from which he took a piece of dirty paper, on which were scrawled a few words in pencil. Woodcock recognised it immediately; it was a note which he had hidden in his cell on the morning of the day when his mind was made up to bolt.

With a face of thunder, the Colonel handed it to him.

"That'll show you the kind of joke-on-the-scaffold kind of criminal we have to deal with," he said.

Woodcock took the paper and read his own farewell message to the Colonel.



"Dear Guvner,—Please excuse the liberty I am taking, but—— Yours affectionately,

"RICHARD WOODCOCK."

"Did you ever in your whole life hear of anything so impertinent?" said the Colonel, glaring at him.

"Awful cheek!" returned Woodcock, with a merry twinkle at the back of his eyes. "You'll have him hanged, won't you?"

The Colonel was about to give it as his opinion that hanging twice over, with shooting to follow, was a merry death compared to what was in store for 49, when there came an interruption. There was a knock at the door, and in answer to the Colonel's "Come in!" a warder in a somewhat dishevelled state entered.

CHAPTER XV.

WITHIN THE PRISON GATES.

"WELL, BARLOW, what is it?" demanded the Colonel, addressing the warder who had just entered the room.

"If you please, sir," stammered the man, excitedly, "we've found Roberts, and——"

Here he chanced to glance at Woodcock, and he stood still, with his mouth open.

"What are you staring at?" roared the Colonel, in defence of his guest.

The man switched his eyes away from Woodcock.

"I beg parding, sir, but——" and he switched them back again.

"Eyes front!" roared the Colonel; and Woodcock smiled.

"Let him go, Colonel," he said, indulgently. "You yourself noticed the resemblance, you know."

"Yes, I did, dear boy," responded the Colonel; "but that doesn't excuse every Jack, Tom, and Harry who comes along——"

The Colonel's "dear boy" restored confidence in the warder, and he was most apologetic.

"I beg parding, sir," he said, "but the fact is my nerves is unstrung, and I ——"

"Well, what is it you've come to tell me?" broke in the Colonel. "Come, out with it!"

"Well, sir, we've got Warder Roberts, sir, and we've brought him in, sir."

"Brought him in? Dead or alive?"

"Alive, sir; but he's——"

"Alive?" cried the Colonel, starting to his feet.

"Yes, sir; but he's what you might call——"

"Naked," suggested Woodcock; and the Colonel, having turned towards him with a bewildered expression, glanced back again inquiringly at the warder.

"No, sir," replied the warder. "He's off his napper, sir. What I mean, sir, is he's not quite right in his 'ead. Me and Baltrop 'ad a terrible job with 'im, sir.

We found ’im asleep in an ’ollow about three miles the other side of Avington, and w’en we wakes ’im up, sir, ’e looks at us as if we was after ’is body. Then ’e ups and bolts for dear life. We caught ’im after a mile run, and it took me and Baltrop all our time to hold ’im. He said ’e wasn’t coming back to prison for all the warders on earth; and w’ile we was bein’ kind to ’im, so to speak, ’e bit and scratched most dreadful. But in the end we got ’im under and brought ’im back. Seems to me, sir, ’e’s got a notion into ’is ’ead as ’ow ’e’s No. 49.”

“This is most extraordinary,” said the Colonel.

“You’re right,” said Woodcock. “This fellow’s clothed, but in his wrong mind; and, as far as I can see, No. 49’s running about naked. Look here, Colonel: what did I tell you? That convict left the jungle-patch—I mean the thicket—as bare as the moor itself.”

“Where is Roberts now?” asked the Colonel, turning to the warder.

“In the yard, sir. Baltrop and two or three others is ’olding him tight.”

“All right, we’ll come out and see how matters stand. Come along, Armstrong; it’ll be an experience for you.”

“I’ll stay here till you come back if you like,” said Woodcock. “Perhaps I shall be in the way.”

“Not a bit of it, dear boy. Come along.”

There was no help for it. The warder might recognise him, in which case it would be very awkward. But then, again, the warder was supposed to be “off his napper,” and consequently whatever he said would carry no weight. At all events, it was more dangerous to hold out than to go. Accordingly Woodcock went, following the Colonel and the dishevelled warder along the corridors until they came at last to the prison yard.

There two strapping fellows were holding the man whom Hardwicke thought he had killed, and who imagined himself to be No. 49. He wore a sullen look, as if he had missed opportunities. He had been advised to make for the coast and leave his awful past behind him, and start a clean life in a new country, and instead of doing that he had messed about on the moor and been captured. Woodcock, keeping discreetly in the background, regretted this tremendously.

“Well,” said the Colonel, confronting the captured warder, “I’m glad to see you back again.”

The warder looked at the Colonel sullenly, as if he saw solitary confinement staring him in the face.

“Oh, sir,” he gasped, “I won’t try to escape again if you’ll only be lenient with me. I—I——”

“What in thunder?” cried the Colonel. “You haven’t escaped.”

“I know I haven’t, sir; but if you’ll be lenient——”

“ ’E’s clean off, sir,” interposed one of the warders. “ ’E seems to think as ’ow ’e’s No. 49, sir.”

There seemed no reply to this, for the prisoner’s demeanour plainly showed that he thought himself No. 49. But a side issue broke into the yard. It came with a scream and a rush—the scream and the rush of a woman.

From one of the corridors there appeared a female in a terrible state of excitement. It was Mrs. Roberts, who had just heard that her husband had returned. She came on like a whirlwind, and launched herself full on the luckless warder’s neck.

“Oh, Dick, Dick!” she cried. “You’ve come back! Where have you——”

But Dick, pulling himself together, recognised the position with a sickly grin and pushed her away. He seemed quite sane now.

“My good woman,” he said, “I don’t understand you. Who are you, and what do you want with me?”

“Dick, Dick, don’t you know your own darling wife?”

“No, I’m hanged if I do!” replied Dick. “I don’t remember any wife. You’re making a mistake, woman. Stand off!”

Now, Mrs. Roberts, as Woodcock assured himself with a sardonic smile, was not remarkably good-looking. Indeed, he had gathered, through the chinks of his prison life, that she was in the habit of leading Warder Roberts a most unenviable existence. Wherefore the possible pathos of the situation did not appeal to him.

“Unhand me, woman!” cried Roberts again, as the Colonel twisted his moustache, and the others looked on in amazement at this domestic tragedy.

But she would not unhand him, although, under the circumstances, his guards were forced to do so. She clung, and he struggled. It was bad enough to be recaptured and hauled back to prison; but to be set upon by a bold woman of this kind was too much for him. He flung her off and appealed to the Colonel.

“What nonsense is this?” he cried. “She ain’t none of mine! Send her away!” Then he chanced to catch sight of Woodcock. “Ah,” he cried, “here’s some one who’s my friend!”

“Gad! it’s getting a bit thick!” thought Woodcock, as the warder approached him with recognition on his face.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT THE WARDER RECALLED.

WOODCOCK'S characteristic mental remark to the effect that it was "getting a bit thick" was in itself a call upon all his resources of fence and cunning. That one possessing the cheek of the aged one and the gall of a canal horse, to say nothing of the cool cleverness of the "fox that camped in our larder," had lately escaped from gaol was well known by all; but that he had returned to use all that cheek and gall and cool cleverness in proving that things are not what they seem was never dreamt by any. In view of this, Woodcock did what to him was the obvious thing. He gazed blandly on the warder, and remarked:

"My good fellow, I don't remember you; and as to helping you before, can you recall the circumstances?"

The warder shook off his clinging wife again, and proceeded to answer Woodcock's question.

"Can I recall the circumstances?" he said. "I should think so! It's the first thing I can remember. I don't know what happened before—it's clean gone (get away, woman!)—but this I can remember. When I came to in the thicket, you was bendin' over me and givin' me a dose of brandy. You said you had run me down in a motor—(hands off, woman! I never gave you no call to be so bold with me!)—and because of that you'd help me to escape. Soon as ever I see the prison clothes I had on I knowed I'd escaped—(Lord sake, woman, what 'ave I done to deserve this?)—all the same, I had all the recollection of it knocked out of me. Then I wanted to bolt, but you told me some more of it—that you'd found the corpus of a warder near by. You said I'd made a norful mess of him; and then says you, 'Can't you remember nothing of it?' 'No,' says I; 'it's clean gone. I can't remember me name even.' 'Your number, you mean,' says you. 'Here it is—No. 49.' And there it was, sure enough, on me prison clothes. (Strike me destitoot, woman, you seem mighty anxious to throw yerself away on a bloomin' convict!)"

The warder paused for a moment, during which Woodcock realised that all eyes were upon him. He knew he must take a strong course and a bolt-upright stand. His face assumed an expression of good-humoured amusement. He was in no hurry to deny or contradict. That would have looked weak.

“Go on, my man,” he said. “This is valuable information, Colonel”—he turned to the Governor, who, having directed the warders to keep the woman back, was twisting his moustaches and glaring at him beneath his shaggy brows—“Colonel, it seems to me there’s a clue in this. I don’t know if you’ve twigged it yet, but I have.”

The Colonel did not reply. He went on twisting and glaring. The idea that Armstrong, before saving his life, had assisted one who at the time seemed to be a convict was sticking in his throat.

“Go on, my man,” said Woodcock again, addressing the warder. “Tell me some more of what I said and did. I seem to have forgotten it.”

The warder looked at him incredulously, and continued:

“Well, you wouldn’t let me see the corpus as I’d made a mess of; but you says he was just about my size, and if I’d put on his clothes you’d dress him up in mine and pitch him down a well, so’s I could get away in the disguise of a warder hunting for No. 49. Then, says you, ‘By the time the corpus is discovered it might be anyone, and they’ll reckon they’ve found you. Meantime,’ you says, ‘make for the sea coast, askin’ everyone if they’ve seen the prisoner you’re lookin’ for, and then ship to America and——”

“Not so fast,” interrupted Woodcock quickly, for he saw a danger-light ahead. That very afternoon he had used a phrase to the Colonel which, though it had not been understood, might still be remembered. That phrase ran, “and lead a better life in a land where he is unknown.” There was a danger of the warder using words perilously like them. Accordingly he stopped him abruptly to interpolate a question.

“How was I dressed on that occasion? Had I warder’s clothes on, if anything?”

Here Woodcock looked significantly at the Colonel, meaning to convey that if the warder was wearing No. 49’s prison clothes at the time, then No. 49 must have worn the warder’s—or nothing worthy of mention. He had already contended strongly with the Colonel that someone must have been going about naked, and now he was taking a malicious interest in strengthening the point.

Roberts’s face wore a puzzled look. What was his benefactor playing at?

“Warder’s clothes on, if anything?” he repeated, slowly. Then he added, “No, sir; you was in evenin’ dress, with a silk-lined overcoat and a top-hat and patent leather shoes. You was motorin’ to a ball somewhere, I reckon.”

“H’m! Well, and what happened then?”

“I was tellin’ yer. You says, ‘Make for the coast, and get across the sea to America, and——’ ”

“Yes, yes. But what about the corpse? Did I dress that up in your prison

clothes and throw it down the well?”

“Yes. You come back and said you’d done it. Don’t you remember? ‘Didn’t you hear the splash?’ says you. It was then that you tells me to make for the coast, and you’d keep it all secret if I’d promise to leave my awful past life behind me, and lead a bet——”

“Can you swear that I am the man who did all this?” broke in Woodcock, realising that the warder was evidently determined to roll the fatal sentence off his tongue.

Before answering the warder looked hard at Woodcock. Then he said:

“Well, I should have said so; but there—you don’t mean to say you ain’t?”

“Colonel,” said Woodcock, turning towards the Governor and speaking with vigorous decision, “I protest for the third or fourth time. This is getting beyond a joke. This unfortunate likeness of mine to a fourth-rate criminal is beginning to get on my nerves. I——”

“That’s not the point,” replied the Colonel, with an official accent in his voice. “That’s a minor matter compared with the fact that you attempted to aid and abet one whom you mistook for a criminal flying from justice. I ask for an explanation of this.”

Woodcock smiled right into the Colonel’s eye.

“Do you mean to tell me,” he said, in quiet amazement, “that you have not followed the drift of my questions and this man’s replies?”

“Sir, I have followed everything to this conclusion: that you would willingly assist a prisoner to escape from justice.”

“H’m!” said Woodcock, smiling and nodding his head at him several times indulgently. Then he added, with sweetened sarcasm: “As willingly as I would save my friend from drowning, eh?”

“That is a different thing entirely,” said the Colonel, keeping up his tone of severity with an effort, and averting his eyes from Woodcock’s face so as to maintain his official attitude the more easily. “That is between man and man. I am the Governor of the gaol, sir, and in that capacity——”

“In that capacity,” broke in Woodcock, “you should hear both sides of a question before you make hasty remarks which are difficult to recall. Listen to me. There is one thing you have overlooked.”

“And what is that?”

“My unfortunate likeness to No. 49.”

CHAPTER XVII.

CHEEK ALL THROUGH.

AT this the warders, who, holding Mrs. Roberts back, had stood listening respectfully, began to speak among themselves on the matter of this remarkable likeness. “I could have sworn——” and “As soon as I see ’im, says I to meself——” and “If it ’adn’t been for the missin’ tooth I should have——” These were the disjointed and interrupted interchanges which made themselves heard. But the Colonel, beginning to get worried, dropped on them like the banging of a door that shuts out voices in the next room.

“Silence!” he roared. “Who is speaking? You or I?”

When the Colonel spoke in that tone of voice, strong men looked to their nerve-powder and weak men rattled at the knees. The tone was easily recognised by warders, and each man realised that he held his position in his hand—and a trembling hand at that. This was the result that the Colonel intended by his remark.

In the dead hush that followed he turned to Woodcock and demanded:

“Explain yourself, Armstrong!”

“Nothing easier, my dear Colonel,” said Woodcock, gaily. “This is what I gather from Warder Roberts’s tale. This is the picture of events that has drawn itself in my mind. Perhaps I will never make a detective, as you said, but I’ll wager you a fiver that in the end, when all is cleared up, you’ll find it correct. Will you bet?”

“It’s a bet!” whispered the Colonel, seeing from Woodcock’s attitude that all was going to be explained between them. “It’s worth more than a fiver to me to get on the track of 49, and there are odds against your being correct in details. Go on.”

“Well,” said Woodcock, discarding all suggestion of whispering. “This is the story as I see it, and I’ll wager it’s correct as far as it goes.”

Then, drawing on his memory of actual events in which he himself played an important part, he pieced together the scene in the thicket as if he were basing it cleverly on the clues supplied by the warder’s tale. Yet there were certain points on which he was discreetly silent.

“This is how I see it,” he said, airily. “The prisoner reaches the thicket and lies in wait for the warder and knocks him senseless. Then somehow or other

the scene is changed—I don't pretend to say how—and No. 49, having obtained a complete set of dress-clothes—that, too, is a mystery—dresses the unconscious warder in his own prison garments, intending to throw him down the well, where he would soon qualify as No. 49, and so allay all further pursuit.

"Now, then, mark what happens. The warder comes to life, sits up, and betrays the fact that he has lost all memory of who he is and what he has been doing. No. 49—evidently a clever fellow—grasps the situation like lightning, points to his clothes, and calmly informs him that he is late of the gaol, so to speak, but that he need not despair, for, under the circumstances, he will be helped on his way.

"The warder, having a lapse of memory, accepts the situation that he has awakened to, and then No. 49 tells him how he has killed the warder—a man of his own size and shape, if you please. The only thing for him to do is to put on the warder's clothes, and, thus disguised, bolt for the sea and cross to America, and——"

"And live a better——" interjected the warder, in a tone of corroboration; but Woodcock scythed his words off short with a wave of his hand.

"Are you telling this tale or am I?" he said, sharply, as he wheeled round on him.

"You are, sir," returned the warder, sheepishly.

"Good enough. Then let me tell it." Then, reverting to the Colonel, he continued:

"See, now. No. 49 retires and fetches the warder's clothes, and bids him get into them. Now, behold that warder! Disguised as himself, he will start out to chase himself down, thinking that while he is hot in pursuit of himself he will never be mistaken for himself. Observe, now, the astuteness of No. 49! He restores the carbine to the warder, but scatters the cartridges among the bushes, for safety's sake. Colonel, Colonel, knowing the flattering likeness of this ingenious fugitive to myself, how could you—how could you overlook the fact that this warder here, in seeming to recognise me, simply made the mistake that is, unfortunately, not peculiar to him alone?"

Here Woodcock, drawing himself up, bestowed a sweeping frown upon the warders, as much as to ask what they meant by it.

It was a masterly moment for Woodcock. So imbued was he with the fervour of his argument and the spirit of his part that if anyone had taken him mysteriously by the coat-sleeve at that moment and led him down three flights of stone steps into a deep, silent cellar, as dark as a blind black cat groping in Erebus, and asked him, seriously, "Look here, Woodcock: daylight and

publicity apart, who was it in dress-clothes there in the thicket?" he would have replied, "Between ourselves, old chap, it wasn't I; it was No. 49. Everything points to it." Seeing, then, that he had affected himself so strongly, it was only natural that the warders thought they saw daylight, and that everybody present, including Roberts, stood like simpletons, with their mouths open, undergoing a rapid clarification of ideas. At last a term was put upon the pensive silence.

"Armstrong," cried the Colonel, who had listened with a look of dawning intelligence on his face, "I beg your pardon. I was hasty in my conclusions. Of course, of course, it was 49 who offered to assist this man, and now, in pretending to see a likeness in you, he is simply making the same mistake as all the others. Yes, egad!"

The Colonel paused, and an expression of perplexity came over his face.

"But," he continued, "how the deuce did 49 appear in dress-clothes?"

"That, I admit," returned Armstrong, "is a mystery. Of course, his tale of a motor and of having run down this poor fellow and knocked him senseless was all pure invention; but, at the same time, it's just possible he may have waylaid some bicyclist on his way to a dance in Avington."

"That's it!" cried the Colonel, excitedly. "Depend upon it, that's it! But ____"

"Exactly. What became of the bicyclist? Here are three men and two suits of clothes. Somebody went away naked, as I told you before."

At this moment Roberts, the warder, who had been standing leaning forward, with his eyes fixed upon Woodcock's face, drinking in all that was said, realised that the idea that his senses had deceived him was too much for his feelings.

"It's a lie!" he burst out. "I don't care nothing what you say; that there's the man what I saw in the thicket."

"Silence!" roared the Colonel. "The man you saw in the thicket was 49, the missing convict."

"I don't know nothing of 49," replied Roberts, sticking to his point; "but if it was 49 I seen in the thicket, then this 'ere's the same."

The Colonel made an angry gesture. He himself had set the fashion in noticing a likeness between Woodcock and 49; and now, apparently, that fashion was running mad, as fast as Warder Roberts's rattled wits could take it. Here was his good friend Armstrong, who had saved him from a watery grave at the risk of his life, being insulted by a rascally underling, who couldn't even remember his own name or the woman on whom he had bestowed it. It was too much. The Colonel was exceedingly annoyed with Roberts, and when he

was annoyed those who knew him knew within a little just what was likely to happen. But the worst of it was that Roberts had forgotten what a volcano of wrath slumbered behind the Colonel's frown, and consequently the power of association failed to work with him. He was proceeding to remark—when the Colonel, after a pause which had only dammed back his anger for a more impetuous flow, repeated his gesture, with an air of finality.

"Take him away," he cried. "He's forgotten everything—even his respect for his superiors."

"I know what I'm talkin' about——" began Roberts; but the Colonel roared him down.

"Take him away! Explain things to him, and then hand him over to his wife."

This was about the worst thing that could possibly happen to Roberts—at least, so it was pictured on his face. To be handed over to the tender mercies of a woman whom, to all intents and purposes, he had never seen before, was somewhat trying even to a brave man's nerves, especially as that woman had all the seeming of one who could and would talk him into a long-lost husband. Small wonder, then, that Warder Roberts hesitated and held back with all the muscular reticence at his command.

"Do you hear me?" thundered the Colonel. "Take him away and tell him things."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" cried Mrs. Roberts; and with a rush she assisted in the operation of removing Roberts, who, under the impression that he was being badly treated, kicked and struggled. But Mrs. Roberts had both her arms round his neck, and a warder held him on each side; and so he was marched off to have matters explained to him.

"Well," said the Colonel, turning to Woodcock, "after that I think you deserve another."

"Thank you," returned Woodcock, with an amused smile; and together they returned to the Colonel's quarters.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE INTERVENTION OF THE TRAMP.

IT was long past sunset when Woodcock, sweetly amenable to Jarvis's view of things in general, neared the Grange gates. Having convinced the Colonel that No. 49 was a frightful blackguard, who ought to be hanged at sight, and then hanged over again in memory of the occasion, he felt in merry fettle; and as he glanced over at the quarries in the growing twilight he wondered how he could influence the trend of events so as to comfort darling Jack, and in the end bring about his complete happiness. He was genial, and beneath all his rascality he was generous, and he determined that if it was in his power he would put matters straight between Hardwicke and Valentine.

"I'll get down here," he said, as Jarvis pulled up at the gate, "I feel like a cigar and a stroll; it's such a glorious night."

"You're right, sir," responded Jarvis. "I could do a stroll myself later on if I only had the cigar."

"Don't let that worry you," said Woodcock. "Here you are;" and he offered him one of the Major's Imperiales.

When Jarvis had driven in, Woodcock took a turn or two up and down the road, and then, with the quarries as his objective, approached the fence. But as he was getting over he noticed a boy on a bicycle coming down the road. He knew him at a glance for a telegraph boy, and paused with one leg over the fence to wonder if it was the belated message from Birmingham which he had entrusted to the guard in the morning.

As he wondered the boy sprang off his bicycle at the Grange gates. Now, there is always something ominous about a telegram, and Woodcock, fully aware that the one he had given the guard that morning ought to have been delivered by four o'clock in the afternoon, had a suspicion that this one might mean the return of the Major or the end of the world, or something equally interesting. Accordingly he sprang over the fence again, and, crossing the road at a run, called out to the boy just as he was entering at the gates.

"Hi! Hi!" he cried. "Is that for me?"

"For Major Woods, sir," replied the boy, turning.

"Ah, good!" replied Woodcock. "We've been waiting for it all the afternoon. Thank you, my lad," he concluded, as the boy handed him the

telegram. “Here’s sixpence for you. You can keep the London Hospital for six seconds, or spend it in sweets, whichever you like.”

The boy grinned on receipt of the coin, as much as to say there was a sweet shop on the road to Avington, and it was likely to spring up in front of him before he had time to consider things. Then he mounted his bicycle and rode away, leaving Woodcock with the telegram in his hand.

“Major Woods,” read the genial one, weighing it in his hand, as if he were weighing its possible contents in his mind. “I wonder if this concerns me? Ten chances to one it does. I’ll risk it.”

He took a hasty glance round, to see if anyone was looking; then sauntering carelessly along the road, he tore open the envelope. The contents were plain and simple, and ran to this effect: “Major Woods, The Grange, Avington.—Just arrived. Staying in town till Tuesday. Address, Charing Cross Hotel.—ARMSTRONG.”

“Phew!” Woodcock whistled his consternation out on the evening air. What a stroke of luck that he had intercepted the thing! What would have happened if it had gone up to the house and been opened by Valentine? Then he laughed, for hairbreadth escape was the life of him.

Ho, ho! Armstrong—the real Armstrong—had arrived, and was calmly reposing at Charing Cross Hotel, waiting to be encouraged by letter as to his advance on the Grange. But nobody but Woodcock was any the wiser. He had it all, by sheer luck, in his own hands. He himself would encourage this interloper in his own peculiar way. How about a wire to the following effect: “Stay where you are, you blackguard! I have finished with you.—Yours never,

MAJOR WOODS.”

Something of that sort, put in civil, though military language, might settle Armstrong for ever. On the other hand, it might not. There was the difficulty. Woodcock paced the road in anxious thought. His head was full of schemes, but for the life of him he could not decide which was the best. Bah! What did not come by lightning inspiration would not come by cudgelling. He would give it time; he would sleep on it.

Shaking the whole matter off lightly, he took the fence again and made his way towards the quarries. As he went he pictured darling Jack lying with his head out of the fox’s hole, thinking how much happier it was up there, where the growing twilight was beginning to reveal the stars—how much better it was to die than to live, and all that sort of thing.

But Woodcock was wrong—altogether wrong. Darling Jack was doing no such thing. He was otherwise engaged, as his protector was presently to discover. As he threaded his way through the bushes on the outskirts of the

quarries, and made his way towards the fox's den, he wetted his lips to whistle "Life let us cherish," the never-to-be-forgotten inspiration of the bells of Avington.

But before he had struck a note the sound of voices fell on his ears. The sound came from the bottom of the shelving pit towards which he was making his way.

Instantly he checked his whistle, and approaching to the brink of the pit, paused to listen. Could it be Valentine who had found Jack out? No; it was a man's voice, and instantly Woodcock identified it as that of the tramp who had happened on the scene before, and eaten the best part of Hardwicke's lunch. Whew! The tramp! He knew things, and it was soon obvious that he was telling things to Hardwicke.

"Yus, 'e was in hevenin' dress," he was saying. "And, my Stardust, he fitted 'em too! One would 'ave thought 'e was Lord Skidoodle 'isself the way 'e talked."

"Who was he really?" asked Hardwicke, in an interested voice.

"Who was 'e?" echoed the tramp, in the tone of one who knows something. "Ah, that's worth money, that is. I tell you what——"

The tramp paused, and during that pause Woodcock's fingers itched to get at his throat and choke his words back. He would have rushed in and cut the conversation short but for a lively fear that the tramp would recognise him and give the whole show away.

"I tell you what," the tramp continued. " 'E warn't entitled to them dress-clothes. You see it was this way. W'en you knocked that there warder endways with your motor you ran back to look at 'im. Well, while you was doin' that a cove in prison clothes whipped up to your motor, snavelled a sort of portmanter, and slung 'is 'ook into the thicket. Now, wot did that there portmanter 'ave in it?"

"Why a dress-suit and a

few other things.”

“Exac’ly! A dress-suit—there you are. Well, wot ’appens then? You gives the warder up for dead, bunks back to yer motor, and honks off. And wot did the man in prison clothes do, guv’ner? W’y ’e turns up, like Lord Skidoodle, in hevenin’ dress, ’auls that there warder up the bank, togs ’im up in ’is own carst-off prison rig, brings ’im round with brandy, and kids ’im as ’ow ’e’s a convict just escaped from the gaol. Lord! ’ow I did larf!”

“Do you mean to say,” said Hardwicke, in amazement—“do you mean to say that the warder wasn’t dead at all?”

“Dead? No bloomin’ intention of it. But there, ’e’d lost ’is notion of things. You’d druv it clean out of ’is napper who ’e was. ’E looked up at the hevenin’ dress a-standin’ over ’im, and swallered all it ’ad to say. And, my stardust, guv’ner, I tell yer, some of the things it said wos mighty clever. I couldn’t ’elp admirin’ that hevenin’ dress. But, mind you, it wasn’t complete, guv’ner.”

“How do you mean it wasn’t complete?”

“W’y, I only found it out arterwards. He’d taken pretty near everything out of the portmanter except a pair of socks as ’e ’adn’t bothered about. Them socks I ’propriated. I got ’em on now. I feels a torf with ’em. Wot oh!”

“My socks!” said Hardwicke.

“Can yer prove it?”

“Of course I can.”

“How, guv’ner?”

“How? Well by the washing-mark, for one thing.”

“Exac’ly—by the washin’-mark. And was there the same mark on the other things?”

“Not on the dress-clothes, but there was on the underclothing.”

“I guessed it, guv’ner. Look ’ere: there’s a reward out for that there convict. D’you know anything? I’ll divide with yer.”

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BATTLE OF THE SOCKS.

WOODCOCK took his handkerchief out and wiped the perspiration from his brow. Things were getting "thicker than ever," as he phrased it to himself. Those socks were assuming the proportions of a nightmare. Once they came into possession of the police the tramp's tale would be corroborated, and the game would be up. In the presence of those socks he could not bluff it out. They formed the link in the chain of evidence by means of which that tramp could drag him back to gaol. Without them he could face everything—even the Major. Hardwicke—well, as to the idea that he could couple the man in evening dress who found him beneath his own motor-car with the tramp's man in evening dress in the thicket, he relied on his own resources to knock that out of Hardwicke's head. There was no difficulty about that. The clue to absolute proof lay with the socks, and he knew it. He must get hold of those socks by hook or by crook.

Woodcock was a man terribly quick in making up his mind. Although after the brief pause, in which all the points of the situation had flashed through his mind, the two by the fox's den had resumed their conversation, he did not stop to listen further. With a plan in his mind, he darted off silently and gained the open field. He was on his way to Baylis, to whom he would represent that a tramp had stolen a portion of the silver, and was hiding in the quarries.

As he neared the road, however, he became aware of two figures tramping side by side. A glance told him that they were warders returning from the vain search for No. 49. Quickly his mind grasped the possibilities.

"Hi, hi!" he cried, pausing at the fence. "You're just the very men I want."

They drew near at his call, and inquired what was the matter.

"Someone has got in at the pantry window at the Grange and stolen some silver," replied Woodcock. "We heard something and got the alarm. I rushed out, and I believe—I'm not sure—but I believe he's over in the quarries there."

The warders came closer and peered at Woodcock in the uncertain light. He knew both of them very well, and fearing that they would know him proceeded to allay their suspicions.

"I've just been to see the Colonel," he said, "and he tells me there's a dangerous character just escaped."

“That’s right, sir,” said one of the men. “We’ve been out looking for him.”

“Well, it may be the very man. I don’t feel equal to tackling him alone. Come along.”

“Right you are, sir,” replied one.

“I only hope it is,” said the other. “If it’s the man we’re lookin’ for we’re in luck’s own way.”

“Come along, then.”

Together they ran across the field and reached the outskirts of the quarries. Woodcock, full of thoughts, enjoined silence as he entered among the bushes, and led them straight towards the fox’s den.

As they drew near it the sound of voices fell upon their ears.

“ ’Sh!” said Woodcock, halting on the brink of the pit. “He’s talking to himself.” Then he kicked a stone by accidental design, and the voice stopped at once. Then there was a silence, during which Woodcock imagined Hardwicke imploring the tramp not to give him away. This silence was followed by a brief scuffle, which indicated a quick-time disappearance of Hardwicke into the interior recesses of the fox’s den, and then footsteps were heard rapidly retreating through the bushes.

“There he goes,” said Woodcock to the warders. And in another moment all three were following in hot pursuit.

Down the sides of the shelving pit and through the scrub at a dash! Hardwicke must have trembled in his den, only to congratulate himself when the sound of their footsteps receded.

Stumbling over great stones, leaping small chasms and dashing along stretches of gravel, they gained on the fugitive, until at last they came up with him on a level stretch, and pounced on him as he tripped over a stone and fell sprawling on his face.

“Hold him tight,” cried Woodcock, “and be careful. Depend upon it, he’s a desperate fellow. Is he No. 49?”

“No, sir,” returned one of the warders, “he ain’t 49. Turn him face up’ards, Bill.”

Woodcock discreetly stepped to one side as they rolled the man over. He did not want the tramp to recognise him.

“No, it ain’t 49,” agreed the warder addressed as Bill. “It’s some old Weary Willie.”

“That’s me,” grunted the tramp. “Let me up. I ain’t done nothink.”

“Haven’t you, though!” said Woodcock from the background. “Come, my man, hand over that silver you hooked through the pantry window.”

“The silver—I—’ooked—— Well, there! I ain’t bin near no pantry—no, I ain’t——”

But Woodcock cut him short.

“It’s no good arguing with him, men,” he said. “Search his pockets. I warrant you’ll find something. Hold him down there; I’ll look in his boots. These fellows carry all sorts of things in their boots.”

“Right you are, sir. We’ll go through his pockets while you go through his boots.”

So they all set to work, and Woodcock’s work was quickest. He cut the fastenings of both boots with his penknife and removed them. Yes, there, neatly ornamented with silk clocks, were the veritable socks which hung over his head. In another moment he was removing them.

“ ’Ere,” cried the tramp, realising what he was doing, “drop them socks! You ain’t got no call to take ’em.”

Here he began to kick violently, but with both boots off he could not do much.

“Hold him, men—hold him!” cried Woodcock. “There’s nothing in this sock, but there may be in the other. Hold him still.”

“Right you are, sir; we’ve got ’im.”

“Look ’ere, guv’ner,” growled the tramp, between his struggles, “them socks is waluable.”

Woodcock took no notice, but removed the second sock carefully. Then folding them together, he placed them in his pocket when the warders were not looking.

“I can find nothing,” he said, presently. “Can you?”

“No, sir, nothin’, only a few twists o’ baccy, an old nose-warmer, and a box o’ matches.”

“Wot did yer expect to find?” put in the tramp. “A coach and four ’orses,

or a Lord Mayor's banquet? Or——"

"He's hidden the things somewhere about here," broke in Woodcock, "but we can't find 'em now. I must make a search in the morning."

"And in the meantime——" said one of the warders, indicating the prostrate tramp with a jerk of his head.

"He'll find 'em and make off? No, not if you march him in front of you to the other side of Avington and give him a drink or two. Here you are; here's five shillings. Now I must get off to the house and see what's missing."

"Right you are, sir. Thank you, sir. We'll see to him."

"Thank you for nothing," cried the tramp, as Woodcock moved off. "Gimme back my socks! I want my socks!"

"I haven't got your socks, my man," said Woodcock, as he hurried off.

CHAPTER XX.

VALENTINE MAKES AMENDS.

WOODCOCK had fully intended to see Hardwicke, but the tramp's revelations made him a trifle uneasy. Whether Hardwicke would couple the man he had seen in dress-clothes with the man whose doings in the thicket had been described by the tramp was a small thing compared to the certainty that Hardwicke must now either believe or suspect that the warder he was supposed to have killed was resuscitated and set on his legs again. To convince Hardwicke that there were two men about in evening dress that night might be simple enough, but to knock it out of his head that the warder was still alive, and to prevent his making some sort of inquiries on the point, would be decidedly difficult. A man in a fox's den with nothing to eat and an idea in his head does not sleep very peacefully as a rule; and Woodcock doubted whether even Hardwicke, feeble of purpose as he was, would remain long in hiding under these circumstances. Ah, well, nothing could be done except to take him some food and drink later in the evening, and so keep him comfortably inactive. And with this good resolution to warm and fill darling Jack against all dangerous restlessness, Woodcock flung the matter away from his thoughts and cut across to the Grange. He had, at least, got the socks, and that was something to be thankful for.

On arriving at the Grange—where, as soon as Baylis opened the door to him, he was greeted with a bland smile from that worthy, which meant simply, "Give him of the best, Baylis—give him of the best"—he made it his first care to seek his bedroom and dissect the fatal washing-mark from the socks, after which he cut them to shreds with a pair of scissors, and burnt them over a bundle of paper in the grate.

"There," he said, warming his hands dramatically at the first blaze of the paper, "that tramp can say what he likes. He can only prove soft nothings, which don't matter."

Then, when he had seen it out, he went down, to find dinner cleared away and Valentine sitting reading in the drawing-room. She looked up as he entered, and he could see on her face the effect of the telegram purporting to come from darling Jack.

"How silly I was, Mr. Armstrong!" she said, laying her book face downwards on her knees,

and leaning back in her chair luxuriously.

"What do you mean, Miss Woods?" returned Woodcock, airily, as he took a seat not far away from her. "Do you refer to the face at the window?"

"Yes; it was not he at all. He is miles away, very ill, Mr. Armstrong—very ill indeed. But he says——"

"Have you seen him, then?"

"No, no; he has sent a telegram saying he will be here in a few days."

"Oh, I see. So you are happy?"

"Very happy. It is something to know that he is not dead."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Woodcock. "Hungry as I am, I am truly glad to hear it."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" cried Valentine, rising. "You've had no dinner. Where's Baylis? Didn't he let you in?"

"Yes; but I suppose he thought I had dined with the Colonel."

"He'd no business to think. He must be more thoughtful;" and she pressed the bell button.

Woodcock smiled at the feminine contradiction of terms, and calculated hard how he could get hold of a dinner big enough to satisfy Hardwicke as well as himself. He had already tried all the dodges he knew to get food over to the fox's den; and now, as he thought, he began to realise that the easiest way out was to rob the larder after Baylis had gone to bed. Yet he was for trying other plans first.

When Baylis appeared in answer to the summons and received Valentine's instructions to supply Woodcock's wants, the hungry one supplemented her remarks with "And look here, Baylis: in all my tiger-hunting days I never felt so hungry as I do now."

“Listen to this, sir,” said Baylis. “The Major, he says, ‘Give him of the best, Baylis,’ he says; and I shall, sir. And I’ll see to it as you doesn’t call for the fatted calf in vain, sir, if you grasp my meanin’.”

“Right, Baylis,” responded Woodcock, cheerily. “And look here, Baylis: let me have it in the dining-room, will you?”

“No, no,” put in Valentine, energetically; “you have it in here. I feel nervous, Mr. Armstrong.” Here she glanced apprehensively towards the window. “Besides, I want to hear more of your experiences in India. Baylis, bring it in here on a tray.”

“Yes, miss,” responded Baylis. Then, as his feet were heard shuffling away, Woodcock realised that not only must darling Jack remain hungry, but he himself must discourse familiarly on India, a place which, notwithstanding all his attempts at reading, he knew terribly little about. Obviously there was nothing for it but to rob the larder after the house was quiet; and with this end in view he settled down to lie most picturesquely about India. His imaginary experiences of elephant stalking and crocodile taming were scarcely interrupted by the entry of Baylis some ten minutes later with a sumptuous repast; but when it came to close quarters with the food and wine he started Valentine off on some of her own experiences and listened, dallying over his meal with the idea that she might go off to bed before he had finished, and so give him time to smuggle the remainder away.

But Valentine was loth to go to bed. It may have been that her experience of the face at the window had frightened her badly, or it may have been that she was in a sociable mood and wanted to talk. At all events, she would not go, and a time came when Woodcock had to make an end of eating. Then Valentine rang for Baylis, and he cleared away the remains.

Woodcock cast a sorrowful glance at the leavings which he had carefully set by for darling Jack; and then, absolutely clear on the point that he must rob the larder, set himself to tire Valentine out with incessant talk. And whatever points he made on India, however wild and fanciful they were, it must be admitted that he bore them out grandly. More than once Valentine brought Kipling to bear on his points, and more than once Woodcock sent Kipling spinning by comparing a woman with a cigar, to the advantage of the woman. Altogether, his ingenuity was taxed to the utmost to substantiate his new, not to say wild, views of India and of the manners and customs of its inhabitants. And so at last Valentine realised that she had talked and listened herself out, and rose to go to bed.

“Upon my word, Mr. Armstrong,” she said, “you have interested me immensely. Really, there’s nothing like your views on India.”

“I admit it, Miss Woods,” said Woodcock, rising, and taking her friendly hand. He was quite right. His views on India were fearfully and wonderfully wide of the mark, and yet—there was nothing like them.

“You see,” he continued, approaching the door to open it for her, “it’s this way. The more I talk in the West here about our particular corner in the East, the more I realise it has never been thoroughly written about.”

Valentine was about to reply, when suddenly she pricked up her ears at a faint sound outside the window. It was like somebody without stumbling against a rose-bush.

“What was that?” she said quickly, clutching at Woodcock’s arm and turning pale with the memory of a face at the window.

“It was nothing,” said Woodcock firmly. And then they both stood still, listening intently.

The sound was not repeated, and as the blind was down the question of a face looking in at the window was unanswered, if considered.

“Oh, Mr. Armstrong,” said Valentine, looking at him with appealing eyes, “I am frightened!”

“Tut, tut!” returned Woodcock. “Go to bed, girl—go to bed. I’ll see that no one gets in. It was only your fancy; I heard nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Perfectly sure. Your nerves are run down. Go and get your beauty sleep. I’ll see that all the bolts are fast. Good night.”

CHAPTER XXI.

A RASCAL, A FOOL, AND ONE OTHER.

VALENTINE went off, half-ashamed of her nervousness, and Woodcock sank into a chair and lighted a cigar. How long would it be before the house was quiet? How long before darling Jack would die of hunger? These questions were beginning to get on his nerves, when again he heard something brushing against the rose-bush outside the window.

In one instant he was on his feet, and in another he had switched out the light. Then, springing to the window and hastily drawing aside the blind, he peered out into the night.

There was nothing there except the rose-bush and the garden beyond; or, if there was, it had been too smart for him.

"Bah!" he said, as he turned again into the room. "Fancy goes a long way. I'll give it half an hour, and then, what ho! for the larder."

So he waited, smoking thoughtfully in the dark, until the clock struck twelve. Then, at the witching hour of night, he threw the stump of his cigar into the grate and went to make the locks and bolts fast.

In his cautious round, however, he found that Baylis had been before him. Every door was bolted and every window fastened.

"Right!" he said to himself at last. "My way is through the pantry window. I know it's only a flimsy fastening; I've seen it from the outside. That's my way out, and in again. Then I needn't unbolt any doors."

Taking a lighted candle from the hall-stand, where Baylis had left it for him, he started out for the place of his hopes.

As he crept through one doorway and another, with the flickering candle in his hand, the silence which he feared to disturb began to get on his nerves. He imagined Baylis lying awake, listening for the slightest sound, and he crept more cautiously than ever. The door of a passage leading to the back of the house threatened to creak as he held it in his hand. He squeezed through, and passed on, a puff of air from some open window nearly blowing his candle out. He shielded the flame with his hand and crept on.

A turn of the passage brought him to the pantry door, which was ajar. Suddenly he stopped. What was that moving slightly between the doorway and the setting half-moon, vaguely visible

beyond the pantry window through a rift in the garden foliage?

Woodcock came to a dead halt, and pinched out the candle flame with his finger and thumb.

"There's somebody there," he said to himself; and so effectually had he been convincing all and sundry that he was not what he was that he actually went on to wonder if perhaps it was No. 49 who had broken in.

A grin superseded this lapse of identity, and he stood nonplussed, gazing through the doorway and listening intently.

A faint sound gradually became audible, and he speculated on it. Was it the domestic cat getting at the inner meaning of one of Baylis's culinary treasures? No; it was a solid, munching sound, with gristle in it.

Woodcock crept on tiptoe to the doorway and looked in. There, against the waning moon, was a figure engaged in an interesting pursuit—a silhouette munching at something held lovingly in both hands.

Something familiar in the figure gave his nervous system a sudden jog; and, cool as he was accustomed to be in emergencies, he forgot his hold on the candlestick and dropped it.

The clatter of the thing on the stone floor awoke the echoes of the place, and the silhouette paused in mid-munch, apparently uncertain what the moment would bring forth.

Then Woodcock precipitated events by whipping a match from his pocket and rasping it on his trousers-leg.

The flare of it revealed a sight that shook the sides of Woodcock's fears until they laughed.

There stood darling Jack, with a cold fowl, half-eaten, in his hands, and a go-away-don't-worry-me sort of expression on his still hungry face.

Woodcock picked up the candlestick and drew near him, holding the flaming match in his hand, while Hardwicke looked as if he scarcely knew whether to throw the remains of the fowl at him or to go on eating it.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Woodcock, hoarsely, as he applied the match to the candlewick.

“What are YOU doing here?” retorted Hardwicke, taking another mouthful of the fowl.

Woodcock was about to launch on a long, wordy explanation of the apparent fact that he was staying at the Grange, when a rush of bare feet in the passage behind warned him of approaching danger.

In a moment he put out the candle again, and then suddenly the pelter of bare feet stopped near him, and a voice hissed, “Move an inch, and I’ll fire—if you grasp my meanin’.”

Without a doubt it was the voice and phraseology of Baylis, who had heard the clatter of the candlestick and had hurried to the defence of his master’s property.

“Don’t fire yet,” replied Woodcock, quietly. “Let me strike a match, and then you’ll be able to shoot better.”

With this he again produced a light, and again the effect on his nerves was more than he could stand.

There stood Baylis, clad in his nightshirt and looking the very man for desperate midnight encounters. No sooner had the light revealed the identity of the supposed burglar than he gave a gasp lowered the revolver he held in his hand.

“Mr. Armstrong, sir——”

“ ’Sh!” whispered Woodcock, with an uncomfortable feeling that Hardwicke was hearing more than he should. “You’re too quick out of bed, by a long way. You’re a light sleeper, Baylis—a very light sleeper. What have you got to say for yourself?”

“ ’Pon my word, sir,” returned Baylis, looking particularly abashed in his scanty attire, “I thought you was No. 49. I did, really, sir. Did you want something to eat, sir?”

“No, no,” Woodcock replied hastily, for Baylis was moving towards the pantry to supply him with everything “of the best.” “No, Baylis; I was just having a look round to see if all was safe.”

“But the pantry window’s open,” said Baylis, feeling the draught.

Here the match went out, and Woodcock was not sorry.

“Is it?” he said. “So it is, by Jove! You stay where you are, Baylis, while I close it. You’ll catch your death of cold if you come a step further.”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DAWN OF SUSPICION.

"EH—LOOK here, Baylis: I'll tell you plainly," continued Woodcock, after a short but dramatic pause. "I was looking for something to drink. Can you do anything for a dying man?"

"Lord, sir, yes!" returned Baylis. "I'll go and get my keys, and you shall have what you like, sir. The Major, he says, 'Give him of the best, Baylis—give him of the best.' And, believe me or believe me not, sir, you shall have the very best."

With this he shuffled off, and Woodcock entered the pantry in the dark.

"Keep quiet, you duffer!" he said, as he brushed by Hardwicke on his way to close the window. "You ought never to have come. You're running an awful risk. That chap's in league with the police. Besides, I was just coming over to you with some food."

"All that's right enough," said Hardwicke, who seemed to be stumbling on to new and incomprehensible puzzles at every fresh step of his inglorious career; "but he called you Mr. Armstrong. Do you——"

"Tut, tut!" replied Woodcock, suppressing his voice to a whisper. "He's got Mr. Armstrong on the brain. Armstrong—I've left Armstrong in the drawing-room. Ha, ha!" Woodcock laughed under his breath. "Armstrong gave him a sovereign to-day, and the doddering old fool has got so elevated on the strength of it that he's not only addressed me as Mr. Armstrong all the evening, but——"

Here Hardwicke clutched him by the arm. He was evidently not in the mood for long explanations. There were things more important.

"Armstrong in the drawing-room?" he hissed, viciously. "Where is Miss Woods? Is she there, too?"

"No; it's past midnight. She's gone to bed. Look here, now: don't you get excited."

"But——"

" 'Sh! Quiet! Listen!"

The pattering of Baylis's walrus feet could be heard approaching, and in another moment his voice inquired, "Mr. Armstrong, sir?"

“There he goes again!” whispered Woodcock. “ ’Sh! Stand very quiet, and I’ll see you through.”

Then, leaving Hardwicke where he was, he darted through the pantry door, and met Baylis with a lighted candle in one hand and a bottle of port in the other. He was just in time to arrest the butler’s progress within a yard or two of the pantry door.

“Baylis, Baylis,” he cried, “you’ll catch your death of cold! Come, open that bottle, and take a glass yourself before the night air takes you.”

He took him by the arm and started to lead him away—anywhere away from Hardwicke. Baylis objected, and held back.

“The pantry window, sir,” he said. “It’s wide open; I can feel the draught.”

“All the more reason you should get out of it, Baylis. A draught of that wine will do you more good. Run along. Go and open the bottle while I shut the window.”

“Be sure you see that no cats have got in, sir,” insisted Baylis, who still showed a strong disposition to remain where he was and be assured of the safety of his delicacies.

“Yes, yes,” Woodcock insisted in his turn. “I’ll see that everything’s all right. Now you get away. Man”—here he spoke in a whisper, lest Hardwicke should hear—“the Major would never forgive me if you caught cold and died through any foolishness of mine.”

Baylis was almost overcome with emotion at this gracious solicitude on the part of the honoured guest, and quite lost his mental balance for the moment.

“Lord, sir,” he said, “do you think I should tell him what I died of? No, sir, not if I lived to be a hundred, if you grasp my meanin’.”

“Very well. Edge off, and get that bottle open.”

“Yes, sir, and that right gladly. Be sure to fasten the window securely, sir; them cats is somethin’ crool when there’s a cold fowl or two about. I’ll take this into the dinin’-room, sir.”

With this he shuffled away, and Woodcock, having watched him through the nearest doorway, hurried back into the pantry.

“Hardwicke,” he said, “you’ve had a narrow escape. For goodness’ sake, get out of it as soon as you can. That old fool will be back here as soon as he’s opened that bottle. He’s certain to want to see for himself that all’s safe. Get out through the window, and take the fowl with you. I’ll bring what’s left of the bottle, and anything else I can get, over to you as soon as all’s quiet. See?”

“All right,” returned Hardwicke, in an uncertain kind of voice. “You go and keep him quiet for a bit. It took me some time to get in, and it’ll take me

some time to get out. Come on, edge off. You'll catch cold if you stay here; and the Major would never——"

"Sh!" interposed Woodcock, anxious to cut him short, under the pretence that he was talking too loud; and, besides, the tone of his remarks seemed a shade too sarcastic. "Be quiet, and get out as soon as you can. I'll keep him quiet ten minutes, and by that time you'll be clear. Draw the window to after you."

"All right," said Hardwicke. "I'll draw it to."

Woodcock made his way to the dining-room, where he found Baylis pouring out the wine.

"Ah, that's right, Baylis," he said. Then a snatch of a song, sung reminiscently by a Yankee blade who had worked himself into a snug position in the gaol through sheer cleverness, recurred to him, and he sang the refrain that he had often heard through the wall of his cell. It went to the tune of "Sweet Beulah Land." Take it as it is lined.

"How dry I am!
How dry I am!
Lord only knows how dry I am!"
Chorus: "Then give us a drink, bar-tender;
You know we love you so.
Give us a drink, bar-tender—
Just one before we go."

It was a fetching air, and it fetched a large bumper of port from Baylis's hand. But he did not drink it; he forced it back on Baylis.

"Here you are," he said. "I'm afraid of your catching cold. You have this; the bottle's good enough for me."

To prove the truth of his words, he snatched the bottle from Baylis's hand, and, relinquishing the glass, bade the butler drink.

"I'll take it up with me, sir," said Baylis, who feared the Major's eye glaring at him from Alexandria or the nearer East.

"Rot!" said Woodcock, who had lived three years in a place where there were few distinctions of caste. "Rot, Baylis! Drink it down; it may save your life."

"No, sir," returned Baylis, firmly. "I never forget my place, sir, if you can grasp my meanin'. The Major may be thousands of miles away, but——"

The picture of Baylis standing there in his nightshirt, with a glass of good old port in his hand, and looking as solemn as a liveried official with nothing on can be expected to look, while he refused to drink because of some silly notion bounced into him by the Major, was altogether too much for Woodcock. He doubled up with laughter, and would have rolled on the floor

had it not been for a tender consideration for the bottle of port.

Meanwhile Baylis stood gaping at him, trying hard to “keep his place.”

“Drink it down, Baylis,” said Woodcock, controlling himself with an effort. “Why, man, the Major would never forgive me if you took cold through any foolishness of yours—I mean mine. Drink it down, I tell you, or, by Jingo! if you don’t I’ll sprawl you out and pour it down.”

Woodcock’s attitude was so forcible that Baylis began to fear him and forget the Major.

“I know a gentleman when I see one, sir,” he said; “and as for you, sir, if you told me to fly in the air I’d do it. So here’s your very good health, sir, if you can understand my meanin’.”

“That’s right. Here’s yours.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN IMPROMPTU BOXING MATCH.

THERE was a long pause, in which it was not the wine poured forth but the wine drunk that told. But no sooner had Baylis removed his glass from his lips than the door was flung wide open, and in rushed Hardwicke, wild-looking enough as to his garments, but still wilder-looking in the expression of his face. It seemed that he, too, had found wine. Or was it merely a long-cherished jealousy that twisted his face out of the natural?

However it might be, it was evident that what his face lacked other things supplied. In his hand was a poker, stout unto death, though bent with long service in the kitchen fires. The hand that held it stiffened as he demanded:

"Where is this Mr. Armstrong?"

"He's just gone upstairs," said Woodcock, as cool as an inch of steel. "D'you want him?"

Hardwicke was a little taken aback, but he managed to keep his blood up; and the fact that Baylis dropped his empty glass from his startled fingers did not influence him in the slightest.

"I do want him," he said, between his teeth, as the poker stiffened again in his hand. He was about to proceed, when Baylis's British blood mastered him, and he made a spring past Woodcock and fastened on Hardwicke's throat.

Then darling Jack had a tough five minutes. He dropped the poker in self-defence, and seized Baylis by the ribs. But the butler's ribs were the best beef; and, besides, other parts of him were active. In less time than it took for Hardwicke to clench his teeth and apply for a grip he was rolling on the floor with Baylis all over him, while Woodcock set down the bottle for the moment and umpired the situation.

"Now, then, Baylis," he cried, like a man at a boat race or a dog fight, "swivel! Get up on him! No—yes—gad! you're top dog! No; by Jove, you're over! Stick to him! Go on! The Major can see you, Baylis. Heave up! Gad! How they roll! It's a level average. Stick to him, Baylis! Here you are."

With this he sprang to the door and held it wider open, for they were rolling and gouging towards it for all they were worth.

"Allow me. This way." Then, as they rolled through into the hall, Woodcock followed, crying, "Take your time, Baylis—take your time. Don't hurry it."

At this juncture he observed Hardwicke jabbing Baylis in the floating rib, and his indignation rose.

"Foul! Foul!" he called, with all the midnight importance of a referee. But he had no whistle to blow, and, as the combatants did not stop, he could do nothing.

"Now, then, lift her!" he cried, as he observed Baylis playing bottom dog. "Lift her! That's right. Stick to him, Baylis! Here you are, gentlemen; this way!"

He sprang to open the drawing-room door, for they had rolled and scrambled across the breadth of the hall.

"This way, gentlemen!"

In they went at fighting pace, and the chairs and small tables began to suffer. An idea occurred to Woodcock. It might be necessary to beat a retreat when they found their tongues. Who knew? It might. Accordingly he darted to the front door, unbolted it, and left it slightly ajar. Then he returned to the scene of battle.

While the two were rattling among the furniture, and punctuating their war with gnashes and swear words, Woodcock's musical blood got up. He would have music to this scene, and the only music he knew was a snatch out of "The Battle of Prague," where the groans of the dead and the dying play a prominent part.

Woodcock sprang to the piano and did his level best. Incidental music seemed necessary, and he hammered it out as hard as a three years' lapse of memory would serve him.

"Give it to him, Baylis," he said, as he rapped out the cannonade regardless of the sleeping household. "Make him sit up!"

And as he played the two fought. Chairs were upset, table-legs were dislocated, and footstools moved in time with the fight. But still both seemed game; and Woodcock stumbled on, equally game.

In the midst of this struggle in the dim light from the hall and the dining-room beyond there came an interruption. The door softly opened wider, and a figure draped in a dressing-gown appeared. Woodcock, suddenly aware that Valentine had been awakened by the noise, stopped playing; but the two on the floor thrashed along, oblivious of any fresh arrival on the scene.

"Miss Woods," he said, running and pushing her through the doorway with gentle resistance, "go back to bed."

"Oh, Mr. Armstrong," she replied, shrinking back, "what is happening?"

"Nothing," he returned—"nothing at all. Go back to bed."

"No, no. What is that noise? Listen. Oh, it is terrible!"

It was. What with the punching and grappling and rolling and swearing and scattering of furniture, it was nothing less than awful.

"Go back to bed," he said, peremptorily. "It's nothing at all. I'll see to it. Run along."

But she didn't run along. She stood there wringing her hands in the dim hall light.

Woodcock looked back into the room. The two combatants had regained their feet and were swaying towards him.

"Leave it to me," he said to Valentine—"leave it to me. Stand aside!"

She drew back a little, impelled by his vehemence. Then Woodcock turned back into the drawing-room, intent on separating the combatants.

They clinched, they pummelled, and swore; they separated and clinched again. Then, as Woodcock strove to intervene, Hardwicke suddenly seemed to agree with him, for he flung Baylis from him violently and stood, staggering.

Instantly Woodcock seized his opportunity. He darted forward, took Hardwicke unawares, with one arm beneath his knees and the other round his shoulders, and lifted him like a baby.

"Quiet!" he said. "Quiet, or you're done!"

Then he whisked him through the doorway, brushed Valentine in passing, and, hurrying through the hall, kicked the

front door wide open, and hustled with his burden out into the night.

Hardwicke struggled, and Woodcock almost dropped him; but being fresh, while his burden was exhausted, he prevailed, and hurried down the path, never stopping till he was well away from the house.

"You silly fool!" he said, setting Hardwicke down on the gravel path. "It was a jolly good job Armstrong was in bed and asleep. Gad! You would have been detained, and then—— Well, you know what manslaughter is, don't you?"

Hardwicke was too exhausted to reply. He puffed and panted and strove to speak, but words failed him; he was too exhausted with his desperate struggle. He delivered himself up into Woodcock's hands, and even thanked him breathlessly for rescuing him.

"All right," replied Woodcock. "Now hurry off to the fox's den. You're safe there. Come on. You never know whom you may meet, but with me you're safe."

Hardwicke, exhausted as he was, had lost all interest, and he now followed Woodcock out through the gate like a lamb. Over the fence and through the fields to the quarries they went, and finally Woodcock sent him repentantly bedward, and returned, whistling "Life let us cherish"—the air that came easiest to him.

As he neared the Grange he briefly decided to inform anyone that asked him the question that he had chucked the intruder into the nearest ditch and left him. Then, as he entered at the still open door, a sudden thought occurred to him.

"Yes," he said to himself, "I'm tired of this humdrum existence. I'm dying to see Armstrong. To-morrow I go up to town and get a glimpse of him."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RASCAL GOES TO TOWN.

NEXT morning Woodcock announced to Valentine, at the breakfast-table, that it was his intention to go up to town. The disappearance of his luggage was becoming a very serious matter, and it was high time for him to go to Scotland Yard and insist on his goods and chattels being restored to him.

"But," said Valentine, "you can't leave me here all alone, with all these burglars and escaped convicts about."

"Of course I can," returned Woodcock. "Baylis will protect you. He's a perfect demon, is Baylis."

"I am that, sir," said Baylis himself, entering the room with fresh coffee at that moment. "Look at me bruises, sir. I ain't ashamed on 'em; no, sir. They was got for 'ome and beauty and the protection of the Major's property. I only wish he could see me now!"

Baylis, having set the coffee down, stood in an attitude that seemed to invite mental photography. His face was a coloured pictorial badly executed. Spaces that were not occupied by bruises were devoted to cheap display advertisements of Hardwicke's prowess with his "ten commandments"—for it must be remembered that a man who is not handy with his "fives" works wonders with his "tens." His eyes were still weeping; in fact, they were thoroughly water-logged with humours that were anything but humorous; and his cheeks—well, the best that can be said of them in the light of the above remarks is that they were decalogued—if you can grasp our meaning.

Altogether Baylis was a picture to be proud of; and if the Major had witnessed the fight and its aftermath he would undoubtedly have presented Baylis with a second work on India, for the further improvement of his mind.

"Baylis," said Valentine, "you did your duty. There's no mistake about

that."

"Ay, miss; and I'd be only too pleased to do it over again, if I had the chance. Have you any sort of lotion, miss, that would——"

"Of course," cried Valentine, starting up. "How silly of me not to think of it! I'll go and fetch you something."

"But how shall we find him?" asked Baylis, detaining her with his question.

"Find him, Baylis? Why, what do you mean? You want the lotion for——"

"For the other, miss, if you can grasp my meanin'. I'm thinkin' his face is ten times worse than mine, miss."

With this, Baylis, with a lopsided grin, withdrew, leaving them to grasp his meaning.

"Funny old dog!" said Woodcock, when he had finished laughing. "But look here, Miss Woods: you're perfectly safe with Baylis. I've got all sorts of business up in town; and if you're afraid of the man who came here last night—well, you needn't be. I carried him out to the road and chucked him into the ditch. He was only a hair-pin compared to the pair of tongs called Baylis. He won't come back, I'm sure."

"Well," returned Valentine, giving in reluctantly, "if you must go, you must. But come back early."

Woodcock assured her he would return as soon as his business was accomplished, and soon afterwards took his leave to catch the nine o'clock train for London.

Passing out at the gate, he left the quarries, with its fox's den and darling Jack, to the tender mercies of circumstance, and hurried to the station. There, as he passed in at the little wicket-gate, a policeman near by saluted him with respect.

"Ho, ho!" thought Woodcock. "The Major is feared in the land. I am his honoured guest, and no man is going to run the risk of mistaking me for the man I am most like. That salute tells me that what happened at the gaol yesterday has trickled out. I am safe in Avington, at least. Why? Because I resemble myself very closely. Ha, ha, ha!"

While the laugh was still on his lips the station-master approached him respectfully, and, touching his cap, remarked:

"All my efforts have been in vain, sir. Your luggage is nowhere to be found. It is annoying—very annoying. I only hope the Major will understand that I am helpless in the matter."

"Don't you bother any further, my good man," said Woodcock,

condescendingly. “You’ve done your best. No man can do more. I’ll put it straight with the Major—if I can. In the meantime I’m going up to blackguard Scotland Yard on the point. What with the successful escape of No. 49 and the total disappearance of my luggage, I think it’s about time they were spoken to on matters that concern the welfare of the individual and the safety of the public in general.”

“You’re right, sir,” returned the station-master, with an expression of intense relief. “It’s their affair now. I’ve done my best, sir; no man can do more. And I only hope the Major——”

“I’ll see to that,” interrupted Woodcock. “Here, get me a first return Victoria. I can see the train coming.”

He handed the station-master a sovereign, and smiled as he watched him hurrying away to do his bidding.

“Yes,” he soliloquised, “I’m terribly safe in Avington.”

But as he was whirled away from Avington he fell into a sense of insecurity. It was true he was not going to venture near Scotland Yard, his object being merely to come near Armstrong—or, at all events, to have a free look at him; yet, as he proceeded towards London, he felt that he was venturing into parts where his description was known better than his likeness to No. 49 as that of a separate individual.

“Yes,” he mused, “in Avington I am well known by this time as the Major’s guest; but in London I am only known by the photograph of No. 49. Why don’t they know more? Hear me, great Scotland Yard! A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

The train sped on, and Woodcock’s natural gaiety helped him to throw off his gloomy presentiments—or, at least, to transmute them into that spice of danger which always lent a fillip to his rascalities. And by the time he alighted on the platform at Victoria he felt willing, almost eager, to tweak the nose of Great Scotland Yard and play diabolo on any policeman’s beat.

He passed through the station and paused by the side of a hansom drawn up at the kerb.

He was about to accost the driver, when the man looked down from his perch and remarked, with that careless air of independence which comes so easily to hired cabbies, “Engaged, sir.”

This compelled Woodcock to walk along in search of one less independent, and at length he found one. He mounted the step, and was about to instruct the Jehu to drive him to ——’s Hotel, when he noticed a burly individual on the pavement regarding him out of the corner of his eye. Instantly he countermanded his words before they reached his lips.

“Carlton Club!” he said, shortly. Ha, ha! How would No. 49 be likely to want the Carlton Club? Then, as he took his seat and tossed some coppers to a helping hindrance on the kerb, he had the satisfaction of seeing the burly one turn away mistaken. So Woodcock thought, at all events; and as the hansom rattled away he lighted a fresh cigar, and settled himself back to enjoy the freedom of the city, as opposed to his late thraldom of the gaol.

CHAPTER XXV.

SEVERAL GAMES OF BLUFF.

IT was a bright, fresh morning, and even the policemen regulating the traffic seemed bright spots in the gay picture. London was perfect, except for one thing—it contained Armstrong. And yet Woodcock was compelled to admit that, after all, it might not be the same Armstrong that rankled in his memory. The name had an unpleasant sound, but surely there was more than one Armstrong in the world. Yet Woodcock had resolved to be certain on the point. Hence his journey.

The hansom was nearing the Carlton Club when Woodcock, thinking that his subterfuge—if, indeed, it had been at all necessary—had averted all risk, lifted the little trapdoor, and called up to the cabby:

"Don't bother about the Carlton. I'll take it on my way back. Drive to ——'s Hotel."

"Very good, sir," returned the cabby; and they turned off up a side street.

"And look here," continued Woodcock, shouting up again: "you know Clarkson's?"

"The wigmaker? Yes, sir."

"Just stop there on the way."

Woodcock's intention was obvious. He was going to make up. He felt that he had reached a stage in his career when a disguise was not only becoming, but absolutely necessary.

In a very short space of time the hansom pulled up at the shop of the famous wigmaker, and Woodcock sprang out. Then, as he wheeled round to cross the pavement, he noticed a hansom pull up short about forty yards away. In an instant he recognised the burly man as its occupant—the man who had looked at him out of the corner of his eye outside the station. His "Carlton Club" had evidently not been so successful as he had imagined. But surprise and annoyance took back seats in his brain, while his ready resource came forward.

Woodcock knew his London very well, and he knew that three years had not changed it beyond recognition. There were certain places which communicated with the main thoroughfares, and also with some back street. These, and the possibilities they offered, came to his mind at once.

“Drive quickly to the Café Royal,” he said, turning back to the hansom. Then, as he mounted the step, he added: “I’ve forgotten an appointment; you must hurry. Here you are!”

He handed the cabby half a sovereign over the top of the hansom, and then sank back on the cushions.

By the lash of the whip and the spring of the horse Woodcock gathered that he had been understood. London cabmen are invariably born with their eyes open, and this particular one was no exception to the rule. First, the countermanding of the “Carlton Club” order; then the descent on Clarkson’s, followed by a second change of mind on seeing another hansom stop short behind them; and finally—well, a piece of gold under such circumstances is as good as a nod to a blind cabby. Anyhow, Woodcock knew by the way he was tearing along behind the lashed horse that his driver had tumbled to the situation.

On they went, through street and square, until the hansom dashed across Piccadilly Circus, and a few moments later pulled up before the Café Royal so suddenly that Woodcock had to sit back and hold tight to prevent himself being pitched head foremost on to the pavement.

Great as was his haste, he alighted leisurely, and, while directing the cabman to wait for him, found time to notice his pursuer’s hansom dash up and turn suddenly off into Glasshouse Street—the very street that Woodcock was intent on reaching through the back entrance of the Café Royal.

No sooner did he see this than he sprang on to the step again.

“I’ve changed my mind again,” he said, with a laugh, to which the cabby replied with a wink. “Walk your horse up Regent Street, as if I’d discharged you; then turn down Air Street and whip up. Make for the Embankment, and so round to ——’s Hotel.”

Having rapped this out quickly, he sank into the cab and grinned.

“Whether that ’tec goes round to the back entrance in Glasshouse Street, or whether he leaves that to the cabby and hurries round to the front himself, it’ll be all the same. I shall lose him.”

This was his comment, and it was not wide of the mark, for that burly sleuthhound could tell you with indignation, how, having stopped his cab just round the corner, he instructed his driver to watch the back entrance to the café while he doubled back to the front; how he saw Woodcock’s cab walking away empty, as he thought, and finally learned from the porter when it had vanished down Air Street that the gentleman had re-entered it.

As for Woodcock, he told himself, as he sped away towards the Embankment, that ’tecs were not bad fellows, after all, although they were

very apt to be deceived on occasion. Now he felt fairly safe, for his Jehu had no sooner turned out of Regent Street than he made all haste consistent with propriety till he reached the Embankment, when he cooled down, and took the broad way at a leisurely pace. Finally, and without further incident, the hansom pulled up before ——'s Hotel, and Woodcock, alighting, paid the cabby handsomely and strolled away.

For his present purposes it was enough to be in the vicinity of the hotel. He was in no hurry to come face to face with Armstrong, for if that person was the man his memory suggested there would undoubtedly be a mutual recognition; and to avoid all possibility of this he started off in search of some toilet saloon where he could first be shaved close and then decorated with a silky moustache, which he believed would be sufficient disguise.

After searching for some time he at last found the place he wanted. It was the shop of a high-class hairdresser, with a wig or two in the window.

He entered with an expression of severity on his face, and drew the manager aside.

"I am from Scotland Yard," he said, "and I want a quick but slight disguise."

"Certainly, sair," returned the curled and scented foreigner. "Vich vill it be? Hair cut or shave, sair?"

Woodcock looked at him, and finally realising that he was not trying to be funny, but had imperfectly understood him, said:

"Take me into a quiet room, and I will tell you."

"Yes, sair; certainly, sair. Here; this vay!"

The hairdresser opened a door that led into a small waiting-room, and when it was closed behind them he turned to Woodcock and waited.

"I am a detective," began Woodcock; but he got no further, for the foreigner broke in volubly, spreading his hands in protestation as he spoke.

"Mon Dieu!" he said. "Vat it is? I haf no stolen tings. I am a man honest. But yes; vat vould you, sair?"

"Tut!" said Woodcock. "It's not you I'm after. All I want you to do is to give me a false moustache, so that I can shadow someone else without being recognised. See?"

The hairdresser guessed the truth—which wasn't the truth—and was all over Woodcock in half a minute with a voluble flood of suggestions. It seemed that in less time than it takes to tell it he could transform his customer into anything, from a financier to an honest man. He could thicken him here and thin him there, or cut him on the bias, or curl him up, or dye him, or so

transmute him that his aunt would never recognise him —not even in her will.

But Woodcock cut him short, and instructed him to shave him very thoroughly, and then affix, by means of spirit gum, a silky black moustache to his upper lip. That was all.

The hairdresser, being an artist in the picturesque, showed some disappointment, but set about his task with all dispatch. And at the end of three-quarters of an hour Woodcock looked at himself in the glass, and wondered who it was, so different did his face appear.

"You vil catch him now, sair," said the Frenchman. "Oh, yes; you vill catch him now. Is it not?"

"Yes," said Woodcock to himself, as he emerged from the shop after paying his bill, "a man does not disguise himself for nothing; either he is shadowing or being shadowed. But in this case it's a little of both."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MAJOR COMES BACK.

THAT very morning something transpired at the Grange which, if Woodcock had known it, would have altered his plans materially.

Valentine, free from fright beneath the noontide sun, had ensconced herself in a hammock, slung between a branch of the great pear-tree and the torso of a defunct willow, hard by the clear stream where the Colonel had been rescued by Woodcock on the evening of “the face at the window.”

She was lying in the hammock, dividing her attention between the blue sky, seen through the fluttering leaves, and a book laid open on her lap. Further, she was giving half her sub-conscious thought to her “darling Jack,” lying in pain upon his sick bed, and half to the intruder of the previous evening. She longed to see the one and mortally dreaded the other, not knowing they were in sober reality one and the same.

As she lay a-thinking she was aroused by the sound of a footfall approaching. Sitting up in the hammock and turning her head, she was startled to see a figure she least expected to see.

With one bound she sprang out and ran to meet the oncomer. It was none other than the Major, who, with military stride, was advancing upon her.

No sooner did she realise this than she gave a cry, and ran with her arms outstretched to greet him.

"Oh, uncle," she cried, throwing her arms round his neck, "so you've really come back?"

"Yes, m' dear. I learnt that old Dick's son had left the boat at Malta and come by another one, so I came back overland to be in time to receive him."

"You're late, uncle," said Valentine. "He came several days ago."

"So Baylis told me, dear. And how have you treated him? What do you think of him?"

"I—I don't think he's been treated badly," said Valentine, hesitatingly. "Baylis has——"

"Yes, yes; I know. I told Baylis to give him of the best, and I gather that he's done it. But how have you treated him, m' dear?"

The Major took her by the arm with one hand and stroked his short grey beard with the other, while he led her gently back to the hammock.

"How do you like him, Valentine?" he persisted, as he deposited her in the hammock and stood facing her with his keen grey eyes.

Now, Valentine in her inmost heart scarcely knew how she liked Woodcock. He had amused her and interested her in several ways, and she had almost admired him when he told her that he wouldn't marry her for anything. After meditating a moment she came to the conclusion that if she manifested a violent dislike to the supposed Armstrong the Major might want to know who it really was that she was so fond of; so she said, demurely:

"I think he's a very nice fellow, uncle."

"Ah, I thought so!" cried the Major, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I thought so; I knew it! Could the son of my brother officer be anything else?"

"But, uncle, I—I—well, I think he's a very nice fellow. That's all."

"Ha ha, ha! That'll do for the present; that'll do. Not another word. He's a very nice fellow. Good enough!"

"Yes; but, uncle—I hated him at first, because I knew that——"

"Cht! Cht! What did you know?"

"Well I couldn't help knowing that you wanted me to marry him."

Valentine knew that the only way to deal with the Major was to go straight to the point. He couldn't follow a statement at all involved, and anything like a hint or an oblique way of putting things made him call for cannon. Of course he was perfectly astounded at Valentine's remark, for, although he had walked about for months with his wishes in regard to Valentine and Armstrong written plainly on his forehead, he had imagined that his secret was buried in some mental crypt, to which he only had the key.

"What? What? What? What? What?" he cried, in the ascending key of amazement. "You couldn't help knowing? Cht! Cht! Cht! What can a girl like you know?"

"Well," said Valentine, her eyes beginning to flame at the memory of it, "I knew enough to accuse him of—of what you wished."

The Major gasped. What were girls coming to nowadays? But what led to this accusation?

"Ah!" he said, standing up straight, with arms akimbo, and trying to smile indulgently. "And did he say anything to you to justify——"

"Nothing at all," interrupted Valentine. "But I thought that he might, and it was just as well to be first."

"Oh, I see. And what did he say when you accused him of—of what you said?"

Valentine blushed deeply, but she went through with it.

"He said that he wouldn't marry me for worlds, or something equally horrid—I mean equally satisfactory."

“Oh, he said that, did he?” returned the Major, looking far away over Valentine’s head. “H’m! He said that. Well, Valentine, all I can say is that he’s a bigger fool than I thought he was.”

“No, no, uncle; he’s not that,” cried Valentine, not wishing to let the Major sum up harshly the man who had not fallen at her feet. “He’s anything but a fool; he’s an awfully nice fellow.”

The Major’s face softened and his eyes twinkled. Simple as he was, he had always possessed the idea that if the apple of Eden had hung on the topmost bough of the tree, Eve, woman as she was, would have climbed up on the serpent’s back and risked her neck to get it. Accordingly, he decided to place barriers between Valentine and his brother officer’s son.

“Valentine,” he said, severely, “nice fellow as he is, I forbid you to see him again alone. I have other plans for you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, uncle,” returned Valentine, meekly.

“Very well. When Mr. Armstrong returns, see that you don’t go against my wishes, m’ dear;” and with this the Major turned majestically on his heel and stalked up to the house.

When he was beyond hearing, Valentine rolled over in the hammock and laughed.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh!” she said. “How funny old uncle is with his forbidden fruit!”

CHAPTER XXVII.

BIRDS OF VARYING FEATHER.

MEANWHILE WOODCOCK was having a rapid time in town. No sooner had he entered the hotel and found the bar by some unerring instinct than he ran full tilt into someone who imagined the doorway was large enough for two, but found it wasn't.

"I beg yours!" said Woodcock.

"Not at all," said the other, recovering from the shock. "I never stand in the way of anyone in a mortal hurry to get a drink."

While he was speaking Woodcock looked at him and instantly hid his recognition behind his false moustache. It was Armstrong—the real Armstrong from India—the very man who had been in England three years ago surreptitiously, and to Woodcock's disadvantage. But that is a story within a story. It is too long to tell now.

"It was my fault entirely," said Woodcock. "I owe you an apology. Look here: I know it's irregular, but the fact is, I've brought a thirst all the way from Alexandria, and I really was in a hurry."

"What? To raise money on it?"

"Well, to liquidate it."

The real Armstrong laughed and seemed in no hurry himself. Woodcock took advantage of this. His "all the way from Alexandria" had evidently touched the spot.

"That's it," he went on. "All the way from Alexandria; and I've brought with me the thirst of a wooden god, and an inherited antipathy to drinking alone. Will you—er—remember we're not strangers? We've met with a bump, you know. Will you be your cosmopolitan self and join me? or must I die the death of Roland?"

In this speech Woodcock had called up his cleverest classical. He had thudded a long way down the slope of Parnassus since his schooldays, but his memory served him on occasion, and this time he got there. Armstrong wavered in the doorway; then he vacillated towards the bar; and finally he said:

"Well, when cosmopolitan meets cosmopolitan, then comes the death of

thirst."

"Right!" said Woodcock, leading the way. "Breast the bar, and say what manner of death you will die."

"I'll have a peg," returned Armstrong.

Woodcock would not venture on the field of "pegs." He knew that the clean-shaven, heavy, Henry VIII. sort of customer he was dealing with knew all about them, and he didn't.

"You mean a Scotch and soda?" he asked.

The other confessed that it was even so, and Woodcock ordered the drinks.

As they entered into conversation Woodcock felt perfectly safe. The bar was not exactly the light of day, and his false moustache held good. He even twirled it as he took up Armstrong's query years ago as if they were matters quite late in his memory.

Then he himself turned the talk further and further East, until, by gradual sounding, he got to India; and from Armstrong's conversation he learnt more than he had ever gleaned from the books he had taken out beneath the pear-tree in the Grange garden.

The exchange of ideas quickly emptied the glasses, and Armstrong as quickly had them refilled. So engrossed were they that neither of them saw a figure at the doorway. The observant mind behind the eyes belonging to that figure seemed to detect something that was interesting. After a momentary hesitation the inlooker entered and strode to the bar.

Woodcock, as luck would have it, had his back turned towards him; and, being engrossed in the conversation, did not think to look round. Had he done so, he would have seen the burly detective of an hour ago watching him intently while the barmaid drew his drink.

The detective watched and watched until he seemed to be certain; then he silently stole away and hurried to the nearest telegraph office.

Meanwhile Woodcock, relishing the enormous fun of fraternising with the very man whose name he had adopted, plied his wit with Armstrong to good purpose. Incidentally, he learnt that his enemy of three years ago was in no hurry to leave London for the country, having engagements for that evening, and possibly the following evening. He also gleaned that a friend of his father's—a certain Major living at Avington—had a soft place for him—a soft place which Woodcock had been filling very comfortably.

Then, after some desultory conversation, in which Woodcock's prison life served him not a bit, the clash of billiard balls supplied an idea.

"Let's have a hundred up," said Woodcock.

“Right!” said Armstrong. “And five bob on the game.”

“I’m yours,” responded Woodcock; and together they sought the billiard-room.

What with game, game all, game lost, and double or quits three times drawn out, they went on beyond the lunch hour, and at two o’clock were still hard at it, Armstrong owing Woodcock a matter of thirty shillings.

“Double or quits!” demanded Armstrong, as Woodcock potted the red to finish. “Double or quits, and hang the expense.”

“Right you are!” returned Woodcock; and they went at it again.

The score stood presently at “fifty—forty-three,” and Woodcock to play. He was taking a “long jenny” off the white with infinite care, when the door opened and footsteps proceeded into the room.

“Dash it all!” he remarked, as his ball sped two inches wide of the pocket. “I can never get that blessed——”

There he stopped as his eyes met the severe scrutiny of the two men who had just entered. He had every occasion to draw up short in his remark, for he stood face to face with the burly detective and—Colonel Smyth-Walton.

“I was not certain,” said the detective, breaking the awkward silence. “That is why I telegraphed for you, Colonel. Now, what do you say?”

The Colonel did not say anything for the space of ten seconds, and he employed this time in staring hard at Woodcock. At last he recognised him beyond doubt behind that silky moustache.

“Armstrong!” he cried, in astonishment. “Good heavens, man, what are you doing, masquerading here in this fashion?”

“Hello, Colonel!” replied Woodcock, ignoring the real Armstrong on the other side of the table. “What are you doing here? That’s what I want to know.”

The clever detective looked fairly nonplussed at this. He had wired for the Colonel to identify his man, and had lived to see the suspect greeted as a friend. He could not fathom it.

“Bah!” returned the Colonel. “It is the old mistake again! Good Lord! When shall we come to the end of it? This fatal resemblance will—— But look here, Armstrong. Why this disguise?”

“Can’t you imagine?” returned Woodcock. Then, waving his hand towards the detective, he added, with an easy laugh: “This man also noticed the likeness. To avoid a scene I grew a moustache in half an hour; but—well, I will say he’s clever. He’d make a thundering good detective if he’d only choose his man more carefully. As it is, he’s tracked me down, and here we

are."

Woodcock ended his remarks with a hearty burst of laughter, leaning on his billiard-cue for support.

"You've made a silly mistake," said the Colonel, turning on the detective. "You've been shadowing one of my best friends. In fact, I may tell you plainly that you've been tracking down a man who lately saved my life."

"You're not joking?" asked the detective, half incredulously.

"Joking, man? Why, you've made an awful fool of yourself. Yes, and you came very near to making a fool of me, too—very near. You heard what my friend said?"

The detective accepted the position with resignation.

"Will you permit me?" he said, with a movement of his hand towards his pocket.

The Colonel weighed his position against his thirsty inclination for a moment, then he melted.

"Mine's a brandy and soda," he said; and with that the difficulty seemed to vanish, for he took Woodcock's arm and led the way down to the bar, leaving the billiard balls to look after themselves.

The detective and Armstrong followed, and when the drinks were raised and sipped—which left the glasses empty—Armstrong touched Woodcock on the arm.

"Did you say your name was Armstrong?" he asked, as if he had been holding the question back till bursting-point.

"That's me," replied Woodcock.

"That's me, too," returned Armstrong. "My name's the same as yours."

"Well, I never! How singular!" said Woodcock, effusively. "Put it here, old man!"

He extended his hand, and they shook.

"What's this?" interposed the Colonel.

"Why, he's my namesake," replied Woodcock, "and I've only just found it out."

Then Woodcock, realising the danger of entering into details—for a chance mention of Avington would wreck the business—talked volubly. Standing well between the real Armstrong and the Colonel, he made up for three years' lack of conversation in the effort to prevent the mention of the word "Avington," either on Armstrong's part or that of the Colonel.

"Luck favoured him, and he was successful. When the compliment had been returned several times, Armstrong, who had met him as a stranger, took

farewell as a stranger; and when the detective had laughed apologetically over his silly mistake, Woodcock decamped for Victoria with the Colonel.

"I say, old man," he said, when they were in the train, "you must dine with me at the Grange to-night. Miss Woods likes you, you know, and she'll be only too glad to see you."

"That's very good of you, dear b'oy," returned the Colonel. "I'll accept, with pleasure. But look here: take that moustache off. You're quite safe in Avington."

"I will," said Woodcock. "Thank goodness, I'm known in Avington!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MAJOR AT HOME, AND A RASCAL RATHER AT SEA.

NATURALLY heedless of what he did not know, Woodcock stepped out of the train on to the platform at Avington, and insisted on the Colonel's company as far as the Grange.

"It's a fine evening, Colonel," he said, "and a walk won't hurt us. Come along; we'll just be in time for dinner. Baylis is always equal to any emergency."

"Well, my dear boy," protested the Colonel, "I really must be getting to my own quarters, you know—I——"

"Rubbish!" interjected Woodcock. "You come with me. I haven't emptied the cellar yet, you know."

"Well, dear boy, if you put it that way, of course I must."

"Ah, that's right!" responded Woodcock, linking his arm in the Colonel's, and leading him off along the platform. "We'll have a merry evening; Baylis shall give us of the best. Ha, ha!"

As they strolled along by the side of the moving train, the station-master, standing about with all the importance of a man at whose bidding trains have gracious leave to depart, suddenly caught sight of them. His importance seemed to lose its starch altogether as he saluted most respectfully.

Woodcock attributed his quick slump in pomposity to the fact that he had the Colonel by the arm—a feat which, apparently, few men in Avington could accomplish. But it was not that altogether. The station-master knew what neither Woodcock nor the Colonel knew—that the Major had returned, and might be even now on the way to "blow his filthy station to atoms."

In merry mood the pair took the main street that led through Avington, and bent their steps towards the Grange beyond. At a street corner they passed a constable, who, on recognising the Colonel, saluted gravely.

"Aha," thought Woodcock, "this is grand! I feel more at home here than I did at the good old gaol even. While Avington is on my side, Scotland Yard can blow its whistle till it's blue in the face. Oho! I'm on velvet; I tread on air!"

"You're in good fettle," said the Colonel, noticing the buoyancy of his

manner.

"Good fettle's right. It's this glorious climate of yours. I feel as if I could dance all the way to the Grange."

"Dance!" cried the Colonel. "Dear boy, if you want to dance, come to the fancy-dress ball to-morrow night."

"Fancy-dress ball? Where?"

"At the Town Hall. I'm going."

"So am I," exclaimed Woodcock, slapping his thigh. "Wait, though; I've no fancy dress."

"I've got several, dear boy. I'll send you two or three to-morrow, and you can choose for yourself."

"Right; I'm your man! What about Miss Woods? Will she go, do you think?"

"I expect so; she came to the last. Oh, yes; she's sure not to miss it."

Woodcock reflected that the reason she had not mentioned it was probably that her mind had been so troubled about "darling Jack," and such a thing as a fancy-dress ball was furthest from her thoughts. But it was nearest to Woodcock's at the present moment, and he determined in a flash to give "darling Jack" an airing. It was an opportunity not to be missed. But his plan was not yet matured. He dismissed it from his mind for later consideration, and went on chatting with the Colonel, and promising him a merry time at the ball and chaffing him about the ladies—all of which the Colonel took in very good part.

At length they entered at the Grange gates, talking and laughing. To hear them, one might have thought that the Governor of the gaol neither missed nor mourned an escaped prisoner, any more than the said prisoner deserved such delicate official regrets.

"Don't throw your cigar away," said Woodcock, as they reached the steps of the house; "we can smoke inside all right. What the Major doesn't smell the Major doesn't object to, and I hope to smoke all his Imperiales before he arrives home."

"When do you expect him?" asked the Colonel as Woodcock rang the bell.

"Oh, any time within a week," replied Woodcock, airily. Then the door opened, and Baylis appeared flushed with importance. Bringing his walrus feet together with a military click befitting the occasion—a click that he had learnt from a Russian Count in whose service he had loitered a while—he bowed, with beaming eyes fixed upon the pair.

"Mr. Armstrong, sir—gentlemen," he said, "the Major has returned, if you

can grasp my meanin'."

The Colonel ejaculated "Great Scott! This is an unexpected pleasure." But Woodcock looked as if he could not grasp the meaning.

"The Major!" he gasped. "Never! Can it really be true? Baylis, you old dog, are you playing us up?"

"Playing you hup, sir?" returned Baylis, still beaming. "No, sir. He's within—in the library. He's jest bin blamin' me for not givin' you better'n the best, and that's a dozen facts in one, sir. This way, gentlemen!"

In the short space between the front door and that of the library, Woodcock had time to account for any possible display of anxiety by the whispered remark to the Colonel:

"I've never seen him, you know; and—and I'm afraid he'll feel hurt at having his long journey for nothing. They say he's a bit of a fire-eater, eh?"

"I'll see you through," returned the Colonel, pushing him in at the door held wide open by Baylis. "He never eats fire with me."

"Mr. Armstrong and Colonel Smyth-Walton," announced Baylis as the two entered the room.

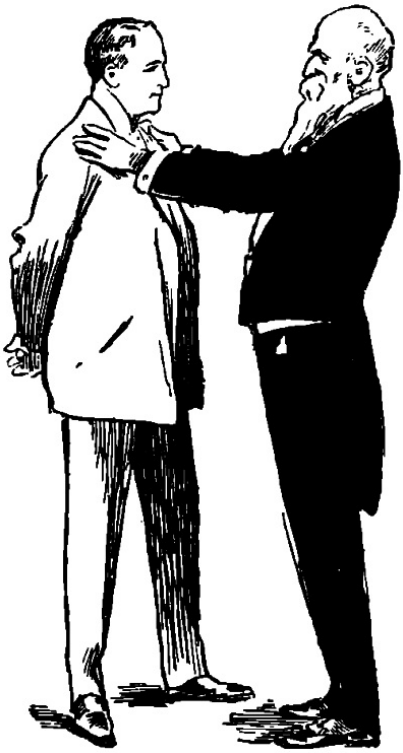
Then Woodcock became aware of a tall, military figure, with grey hair and beard, and an enormous breadth of chest, striding rapidly towards him. His natural audacity bubbled up to meet the rush, and as he stood his ground with an expression of assumed shyness and delight on his face, the Major grasped him by the shoulders with both hands and shook him energetically for some moments, boring holes through him with his grey eyes the while.

"Walter Armstrong!" he roared, at length, in a voice that made the Grange windows rattle and swept Baylis clean out of the room into his own quarters, "Walter Armstrong! You're the living image of your father as he was in the 'sixties. Gad, sir, you've got the same merry twinkle in your eye, the same laughing devilment round the corners of your mouth! Ah, dear old Dick Armstrong! My lad, you take me back to my youth. Welcome to England, my boy! Give us your hand!"

Woodcock was nearly taken off his feet by this strenuous welcome; but he gripped the Major's hand with a grip that would almost have broken a Government pick-handle.

"Yes," he said, in the course of the handshake, "they say I'm a chip of the old block; but, then"—here he turned to the Colonel—"it seems to be my lot to resemble all sorts of people that poor old dad would never——"

"Hello, Colonel!" cried the Major, seeing him for the first time. "How are you? What do you think of the lad, eh?"



“What do I think of him?” returned the Colonel, jolting his words out during a boisterous handshake. “Why, he saved my life the other night. That’s what I think of him.”

“Saved your life?”

The Major always let his voice go when he was excited, and on this occasion Baylis, fearing that, after all, he might have failed to give the guest absolutely the best, shivered five rooms away.

“Come,” continued the Major, slapping the Colonel on the shoulder, “tell us all about it. How did it happen? But wait. Baylis! Baylis!”

Baylis ran incontinently from his lair, entered in haste, wheeled into line, and stood motionless, fearing the worst.

“Fetch us a bottle, Baylis; and when I say a bottle I mean a bottle. Cht-cht-cht! Don’t stand there; ’tend to the business in hand.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

WOODCOCK RECALLS THINGS.

AS the faithful butler melted out at the door the Major remarked, in a fairly quiet tone for him:

"Poor old Baylis is so glad to see me back that he hardly knows what he is doing."

"Good sort—Baylis," said Woodcock, speaking up for him.

"Good sort, sir?" cried the Major, bringing his fist down on the library table. "There's no better sort. But, you know, he's never really happy unless I'm thundering at him in my small way. Look here, my lad: I told him to give you of the best if you turned up in my absence, and he did it, eh?"

"He did that!" returned Woodcock. "He's made me hear harps all day long."

"Good! That's Baylis! I knew I could trust him."

Further praise was prevented by the entry of the subject under discussion with a bottle of old port and three glasses.

"Now, then, Colonel," said the Major, as Baylis did his duty, "tell us the story."

It was soon told; but we must mention that the Colonel, being strongly of opinion that it was a dry tale that did not begin with a drink, drained his glass to the Major before starting; and when it was finished he found it refilled, and drained it again, under the settled conviction that it was a drier tale that did not end in the same way.

"Bravo!" cried the Colonel, raising his glass to Woodcock, who was attempting to discount the story. "Bravo, Walter! This is good hearing."

"It was nothing at all," said Woodcock. "I only——"

"Cht-cht-cht, boy!" cried the Major. "You're a credit to your father. Now, come—tell me all about my old friend as you remember him. I'm dying to hear more about him from your own lips. Your letters were—well, they were always welcomed eagerly, but they erred on the side of brevity, Walter."

"Did they?" said Woodcock, who was, indeed, glad to hear this, for he realised that brevity was the soul of wit in a case of this kind. The fewer the points, the less the danger of contradiction or discrepancy.

“Well,” he continued, “of course, there’s very little time for writing in India, you know. What with drill, and polo, and tennis, you know, it’s a busy life altogether.”

“Of course,” returned the Major, with an indulgent smile. “But now you are here you can never tire me with recollections of your father.”

This was comforting. Woodcock saw himself manufacturing a father out of his imagination in such a way that he could be altered to requirement. His mind began to shift uneasily, though his face showed nothing of it. The pause in the conversation was growing cumbersome. He must say something. Quickly he turned the tables and began to fire questions at the Major.

“Let me see,” he said, flinging one leg over the other and leaning back in his chair. “How long ago was it that you saw my father?”

“Five years after you were born,” returned the Major. “Reckon it out. How old are you now?”

This was a poser. Woodcock had seen Armstrong, and had summed him up as anything between twenty-eight and thirty-five. But realising that the Major probably knew his age far better than he did, he simply said, with a smile:

“Guess. I don’t believe you can.”

The Major looked as wise as he was simple.

“Of course I can,” he said. “You were born in—in—let me see——”

“Ha, ha!” laughed Woodcock, pointing his finger at him. “I knew you couldn’t.”

“Cht-cht-cht!” snapped the Major, testily. “I can tell you if you give me time. Ah, it was in May, 1878.”

“Quite right,” returned Woodcock, making a lightning calculation. “I was twenty-nine last May. You’re quite right, Major.”

“Right, my lad? I should think so, indeed! I have a wonderful memory. Why, I could tell you the day of the month, I believe.”

“What is it?” demanded Woodcock, leaning forward.

“Why, the—yes—no—well, let me see—er—the sixteenth.”

“Wrong,” replied Woodcock; “but you’re very near it—very near. It was the fifteenth—five-and-twenty minutes to five in the morning, to be absolutely exact.”

“You’re wrong there, my lad,” corrected the Major, triumphantly. “I remember the occurrence perfectly. It was about eight o’clock in the evening. Oh, yes; I can remember it so distinctly.”

Woodcock had gone a step too far.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RASCAL MAKES A NIGHT OF IT.

"WELL, well, I won't swear to it," he admitted. "You see, I wasn't there, you know—er—I mean I don't recall it, if you can grasp my meaning, as Baylis says. Funny old chap, Baylis is. He always seems to think his meaning is so—so frightfully occult. But I like him—oh, yes, I like Baylis; and I assure you, Major, he did give me of the best." He glanced towards his empty glass, and then in the direction of the bottle, as he added, "I think this is the same kind of wine he gave me the day I arrived."

"That's right, my lad," volunteered the Major. "It's good stuff. Have another glass. You, too, Colonel."

He filled both glasses full, and then returning to the subject uppermost in his mind, remarked:

"Well, now, you haven't told me anything about your father."

Woodcock's hair began to twitch at the back of his head. The situation was getting rather difficult. He almost wished he was back in gaol again. But it was up to him to invent something, so he made a bold splash.

"Well," he said, "I could tell you many things, but I daresay they would not be news to you."

"For instance?" queried the Major, who apparently was ready for anything, old or new, so long as it was about his brother officer.

"Er—did I tell you in any of my letters how dad killed two tigers at close quarters? It was just after he died—I mean just before; he couldn't have written to you about it himself."

"No, you didn't," gasped the Major, leaning forward excitedly, while the Colonel set his glass down and refilled it from the bottle, through sheer anxiety to hear the tale.

"Didn't I?" asked Woodcock, in surprise. "Two man-eating tigers at close quarters—with a pistol in each hand, and a sword between his teeth in case it was needed? I saw him do it."

The Major stared as if something was wrong.

"A pistol in each hand?" he said, in amazement. "How on earth could that be? Your father lost his right arm at Candahar."

Woodcock, in his surprise, almost said “Did he?” but he restrained himself, and wondered vaguely whether a man could possibly have held a pistol in a wooden hand fixed on a stump. Perhaps he could; anyhow, he would try it.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said. “But you know—or perhaps you don’t know—his great idea towards the end was to have a false arm.”

“What?” gasped the Major. “He never told me about that in his letters!”

“No, of course not; he was very sensitive about it, you know. Well, this false arm was made in such a way—er—in such a way that a string running through the armhole of his waistcoat and attached to a button at one end and to the trigger of a revolver fastened to his wooden wrist at the other, could be drawn tight by raising his arm—you see, by raising his arm, so.” Here Woodcock strengthened a wildly weak story by raising his arm dramatically, as if firing at any number of man-eating tigers. At the same time he filled his glass again and drained it, with the vain idea that if the worst came to the worst he might reasonably feign intoxication, and so finish up under one of the tables which the Major might eventually turn upon him.

“I see, I see,” said the Major. “And?”

“Yes,” added the Colonel, leaning forward; “and?”

Woodcock looked a trifle hurried. He was being pushed. There is no telling what he might have said in his eagerness to proceed in a logical kind of way if an interruption had not sprung to his assistance. It came in the form of a summons to dinner sounded on a gong, and Woodcock never welcomed anything so much in all his life. It was, in truth, the tocsin of the soul, the dinner-gong. And so for the moment the difficult position was pushed off a peg or two into the future.

And that future Woodcock managed to make incoherent. During dinner, at which Valentine was present, he assumed the attitude of one holding himself well in hand against fearful odds. He talked incessantly, and indicated rather than paraded such a profound though guarded respect for Valentine that the Major felt himself frowning at his ward with one eyebrow, while he smiled at Woodcock beneath the other. The forbidden fruit was mellowing—at least, so the Major thought; and as he watched Valentine’s meditative manner on the one hand, and Woodcock’s evident self-restraint because of a lady’s presence on the other, he concluded that here was a man who wished to stand well in the estimation of his ward, and here was a girl who looked carefully into her plate for fear of meeting dangerous eyes. As for the Colonel, the talking and laughing between the draughts of wine were enough to make any man thirsty.

When Valentine left the three to their wine and cigars, Woodcock pleaded his overwhelming joy at the Major’s return as an excuse for wine. The

Colonel, as if in fear that his nose might pale for lack of sustenance, seconded him, and together they won the Major over to conviviality.

Then as the wine began to flow the Major's tongue loosened, and he told them more about his brother officer than Woodcock ever dreamed of learning. As the military fist banged on the table to emphasise points, Woodcock began to think that his father had been a decent sort of a fellow, after all; and though he had no opportunity to say much, he managed to convince the Colonel that the Major was spinning true yarns, and was not exaggerating a single point.

Presently the Major came to a point where he got suspended in the progress of a story because the maiden name of Woodcock's mother did not come readily to his lips.

Here was a chance for Woodcock to supply the word, and the Colonel looked inquiringly at him.

"My mother's maiden name?" said Woodcock, slowly. "Why—er—er ____"

"Look here, boy: the wine's got into your head," laughed the Major. "When a man forgets his mother's maiden name it's a sign that—well——"

"That his host's wine is the real stuff," supplied the Colonel.

"That's it," remarked Woodcock, a trifle relieved. "Don't ask me to remember names; I'm up in the air."

"Do you remember the name of your brother that died at the age of eight?" questioned the Major quizzingly.

"No," returned Woodcock; "I'm blest if I do. But it's not the wine speaking. I must tell you that three years ago I had a rare old accident at polo, and it's a funny thing that ever shinch I—hic—haven't been able to fixsh my memory prop'ly. That'sh a fac'—hic—here'sh to you, my dear old father's pal—here'sh to you, Colonel!"

"Buck up, dear boy!" said the Colonel. "Don't go under, m' lad!"

"Pull yourself together, Walter," added the Major, with his glass to his lips.

"I'm all right," returned Woodcock; but he seemed to be getting all wrong. He dared them to another and another, and stood on his chair in between and

made speeches until he set both of them laughing.

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared the Major. “ ’Pon my word, you’re just like your father! He’d be down one minute and up the next.”

“That’s me!” cried Woodcock. “Major, let me ring for Baylis; the bottle’s empty.”

He had his way, and by the time that the fresh bottle was half-empty both the Colonel and the Major had forgotten the bounds of strict sobriety.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DAWNING OF SUSPICION.

IT was about half-past one that night when Woodcock, having weathered everything, sat on a couch and held his sides with laughter at the Colonel, leaning in a most uncomfortable position over the arm of his chair, with the back of his head nearly touching the carpet, and the Major sprawling forward over the table with his head on his arm, and snoring fifty thousand odes to oblivion.

"I think," he said to himself—"I think that with a little fresh air I would pass muster; but those two—well, the worst of it is that to-morrow they'll forget all my careful explanations of my polo accident and its effect on my memory. Ah, well, I bet 'darling Jack' would be glad to be as full of wine as I am. Poor beggar! I really must attend to him."

With this Woodcock rose, grabbed a bottle three-parts full from the table, and made his way to the pantry. Partly because he possessed a very hard head, and partly because he had surreptitiously emptied glass after glass of wine into a handy flower-pot, he had remained comparatively sober—comparatively being a good word in the presence of the overcome pair.

The house was as silent as the grave, and he was left to rob the larder and the finer products of the pantry in peace. Then, with a plate of cold beef in one hand, a black-currant tart in the other, the bottle of wine under one arm, and a glass and knife and fork and spoon in his pocket, he passed out at the front door, leaving it ajar till his return.

Ploughing across the intervening field, he reached the quarries and whistled "Life let us cherish" as before. But there was no answer. After waiting a moment or two he passed down the shelving bank, and, parting the bushes, brushed through.

There was no sign of "darling Jack." As he stood there, wondering, his conscience smote him. He had neglected his charge, and perhaps the poor fellow had died of starvation. This thought prompted him to investigate the fox's den, and it did not take him long to ascertain that it was empty.

Woodcock shrugged his shoulders in easy acceptance of the position; and then, having set the viands and table accessories well within the den, on the chance that Hardwicke might return

home in the small hours, he made his way back to the Grange, feeling inclined for bed.

On reaching the front door he was surprised to find it locked and bolted.

"H'm!" he grunted. "Baylis has been up looking after things. I'll bet he's got the Major and the Colonel to bed, and thinks I'm in bed, too. Well, well I'll try the pantry window."

But when he reached it he found that bolted, too, and reasoned it out to himself that Baylis had missed the pie. He stood for a moment in thought. Baylis evidently thought he was safe in bed. He would let him continue to think so rather than knock him up and admit that the pie, and perhaps other things, had vanished through the door which he had carelessly left open.

Accordingly he took his way cautiously to the stables, where he knew there was a hayloft. In the uncertain light of a waning moon he descried, beneath the shadow of a spreading acacia that leaned over the stables, a ladder set against the outside entrance to the loft; and, feeling that things had been made easy for him, he climbed up and tumbled in on to the soft hay.

He was tired. He had done a great deal that day; and, besides, he scarcely cared whether it snowed or slipped avalanches. Lapped in the soft, voluptuous hay, he was sinking into a dreamy slumber, when he heard a sigh quite close at hand. Then there was a slight stir in the hay, and a voice murmured, as if in sleep, "Valentine! Valentine!"

Woodcock laughed softly to himself; then he made a grab in the direction of the voice, and seized "darling Jack" by the nose.

Instantly the sleeper was awake and prepared to sell his life dearly. His mode of life had apparently soured him, for he made a guttural noise through

his teeth, and, wresting his nose free, sat up and slashed out in Woodcock's direction.

"Shut up, you fool!" said Woodcock, in a hoarse whisper. "I'm not the police; I'm—I'm your benefactor. I've just been over to the fox's den to find you, and left a plate of beef, a black-currant tart, and a bottle of wine there for you. Don't be an ass!"

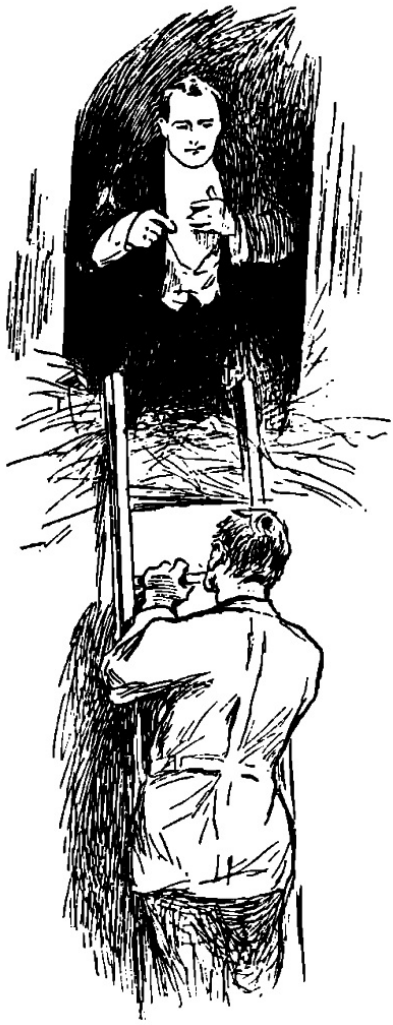
"Darling Jack" took the advice to heart, for he calmed down. Then, to make sure he was not dreaming, he questioned Woodcock as to how he came there. Woodcock explained, and there was no more to say on that score.

"Well," said Hardwicke, now thoroughly awake and allowing a shade of coldness in his voice, "I can't talk now; I'm too hungry. I'm off to the fox's den. But I want to ask you a few questions in the morning."

"Look here, old chap," protested Woodcock. "I couldn't get to you before—I couldn't, really."

"Oh, it's not that," returned Hardwicke, with still more pronounced coldness. "It's a lot of things that I don't understand. There's something very funny somewhere."

Having scrambled to the ladder, he paused before climbing down, and repeated his words meaningly: "Yes, there's something very funny somewhere."



Then, as he vanished in haste to get to the fox's den, Woodcock laughed quietly.

"By Jove," he said, "he's right! But he doesn't quite know how funny it is, and that's a fact!"

He recalled the talk of the tramp, and out of his imagination he added much more that the tramp might have said before he happened upon that conversation. Undoubtedly Hardwicke had developed suspicions which might blossom into curious shapes with to-morrow's sun. But the situation, dangerous as it was, fascinated Woodcock; and feeling that he might lose a lot

of fun by decamping at this early stage, he resolved to stay and see it out.

He waited a reasonable time, to see if Hardwicke would return; and then, giving him up, he settled himself in the hay to sleep. Did he dream of brinks of precipices? No! A ray of the sinking moon struggled in towards morning, and caught him smiling as if he had been left a fortune.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BAYLIS IS ASTONISHED.

AS the shades of early dawn were retreating from the Grange and the twittering of birds in the high trees relieved the silence of the old garden, Woodcock awoke in the hayloft and sat up. His unusual situation roused him fully, and when he had marshalled the details of the previous evening the freshness of the morning began to dawn on him. There was no regret, physical or mental, for the potations of the previous evening. The air of the morning took him by the lungs, and he laughed as he rose and shook the hay from his clothes.

"Darling Jack!" he said, as he went down the ladder. "I suppose he's asleep in the fox's den. It's extraordinary what discomfort a man will submit to in order to show he's offended over a trumpery little matter!"

Then, as he set foot on the ground, he drew a long breath of air and looked up at the blue sky, and admitted that the birds knew what they were twittering about. They were not in a cage; neither was he. Yet it depended on the spin of events in the near future whether he would remain on the outside of one.

The thought was uncongenial, and such thoughts had learned to knock and run away. Woodcock shook his shoulders and strolled down into the garden, humming to himself as he went, "Life let us cherish."

Blackbirds and thrushes hopped over path and grassy patch before him as he took his way beneath the trees towards the stream that ran past the end of the garden. It was like the outside of a prison in more senses than one. Woodcock sternly refused to spoil it with a cigar.

Presently he passed beneath the great pear-tree and stood by the side of the clear, pellucid stream rushing swiftly but silently over trailing weeds between mossy banks. Instantly he was on his chest at a part where the water swelled flush with the bank. To all intents and purposes, he was taking a brandy and water without the brandy.

His thirst assuaged, he turned to practical considerations. The front door was locked, and he was anxious to tumble his bed before Baylis took up his early cup of tea at seven o'clock. Woodcock looked as if he was waiting for a breath of wind to show him how to do this. He sauntered up and down the bank of the stream, past the spot where he had saved the Colonel's life and

back again; then he stopped, looking at the swirling water.

"Why not a dip?" he said, placing his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, and setting his feet wide apart. "And if a dip, why not a towel? Nothing more natural than for a man with a well-earned 'hot copper' to come up out of the nearest stream and demand admittance with a towel round his neck. I'll bet my freedom to a warder's key that there's a towel of a sort in the stable!"

Woodcock returned with the step of a man with a purpose, and searched the stable for a towel. Finally he discovered one underneath a saddle, and it looked as if it had served the purpose of a saddle-cloth for some weeks according to Jarvis's methods. It was not exactly clean, but it was good enough.

Then, to get up a circulation for his dip, he went out on to the road to stretch his legs for half an hour. After traversing the lane as far as the high road, he watched the sunrise and then walked back.

As he reached the Grange gates he heard the yelping of a pack of hounds in the distance, and paused to see what would come of it. Nearer and nearer came the sound, and presently they appeared in full cry in a barren field adjoining the Grange grounds.

Woodcock looked more intently. He saw a fox, well in advance, streaking for dear life in the direction of the quarries. He evidently knew where he could get to earth, for he took the intervening road like a flash, and, with the hounds fifty yards in the rear, made straight for the den of "darling Jack." After the hounds came the huntsmen, some taking the fences at a leap, others bursting through, and still others cleverly finding a way round.

But the hounds were hot on the fox, and Woodcock, foreseeing what would ensue when all hands reached the fox's den, reeled in at the Grange gates and rolled on the greensward within, holding both his sides and choking with laughter.

"Oh, oh! Dar—— Oh! Darling Jack! Darling Jack and his brother brush —— Oh, oh, oh! And thereby hangs a tale. What'll happen?" He sat up, gasping. "Will those hounds eat Jack? Will landlord and tenant fall out on the question of rent? Oh, oh, oh! It's too funny!" And he rolled over again.

But it was no use speculating, and it was no use putting in an appearance. All he could do was to enjoy the scene in imagination from a distance. Goodness only knew what would happen if darling Jack were dragged forth into the light of day; the Grange would probably hear of it before the day was out. That was another thing to reckon with; but the more the merrier was Woodcock's motto, and as he scrambled up and ran off for his dip he did not

seem to miss the seriousness of sober-minded men in tight positions.

Half an hour later Woodcock, wearing round his neck a towel that looked as if it had been dropped in the stream and wrung out clean, applied for admittance at the front door. It was still locked, but it was evident that Baylis was up and doing, for the dining-room window was wide open, obviously to clear the room of the smoke of many cigars.

He approached cautiously, and finding all quiet within, entered. He guessed that the Major and the Colonel had been coaxed, led, carried, or pushed to bed by Baylis at the time that he had locked the front door in the night watches. And his ideas on this point were confirmed a moment later when, passing through the hall, he encountered Baylis himself.

"Lord, sir," said the butler, "you gave me quite a turn. Bless me 'eart and soul, it don't seem no great time since I—I conducted the Major and the Colonel to their rooms, if you can grasp my meanin', and 'ere you are, as fresh as a lark from your mornin' bath, notwithstandin' there was three glasses on the table, all as hempty as the bottles. You're a livin' wonder, sir, you are, and no countin'-'ouse error."

Baylis bowed low in admiration.

"That's all right enough, Baylis," returned Woodcock; "but look here: praise is lost on me. What about a brandy and soda?"

"Yes, sir. I beg parding. It's only natural. The Major—he told me to give you of the best, and——"

The rest of his sentence was lost in the distance; and when Baylis returned in a few moments there was something in his hand which rendered words superfluous. Woodcock emptied the glass and returned it to him.

"Thank you, Baylis," he said. "You've saved my life!"

Then, as he took the stairs, Baylis stood there gazing after him, and muttering to himself:

"He's a mark, he is! A fair swan! Huh! He drinks the Major—and the Colonel—hunder the table, and then goes and sportles in the stream to cool hisself. Crikey! It takes the tenpenny Madeira, if I can understand my meanin'—which I can't!"

And so, lost in admiration, he shuffled off to clear away the débris.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MAJOR RECEIVES A LETTER.

AT half-past eight Woodcock was sitting at breakfast with Valentine, and explaining to her that both the Major and the Colonel thoroughly deserved their breakfast in bed, as they had diverted him so immensely the night before. Valentine, for her part, seemed to have forgotten entirely that the Major had forbidden her to speak to Woodcock alone. She chatted on and chatted merrily, for Woodcock's genial charm was such that no one, not even a girl pining for a man in a fox's den, could be dull with him.

As they talked over the toast-rack the postman's knock was heard at the door, and shortly afterwards the feet of Baylis shuffled along the hall. He then shuffled back and went upstairs, after which he entered the room with a letter for Valentine.

"Was this all?" she asked, taking it up and regarding it as a woman does a dressmaker's bill.

"That was all for you, miss," replied Baylis. "There was one for the Major, which I took up to him, miss."

Valentine's letter was nothing, to judge from her looks on glancing at the contents; but the Major's was evidently something. At all events, it was enough to fetch him out of his bed, for presently he entered the room in his dressing-gown with the opened letter in his hand and a puzzled look on his face.

"Good morning, my dear," he said, looking in Valentine's direction. Then he added, turning to Woodcock: "Walter, my lad, are you a confirmed practical joker, or what is it?"

"What's the joke?" returned Woodcock, looking doubtfully at the letter in the Major's hand; and as he looked he knew that the bolt had fallen. Armstrong had written to the Major. What a fool he had been not to foresee this and intercept the letter at the gate! But there was nothing for it now but to seem to know all about it. Accordingly he smiled and winked at the toast-rack.

"You know your own handwriting, I suppose?" said the Major, handing him the letter, and speaking in a tone that might mean reproof or only mock reproof.

"I think I recognise it," admitted

Woodcock, taking the letter and reading it quickly. “It’s an awful fist, isn’t it?”

But it was not the fist that was awful; it was the matter contained in the letter. It stated in clear terms that, owing to some important business in London, the writer would not be able to come down to Avington till the following day—hence the telegram. The letter went on to say that the writer was looking forward with great pleasure to meeting his dear father’s old friend, and would arrive by the five-thirty train on the following day.

Even from the standpoint of a joke, however wild, this letter struck Woodcock as impossible, but his face never moved a muscle. Even in the tightest corners he always had a feeling that something would come to his assistance. And in this case it did, though it required an alert set of wits to take advantage of the chance.

The Major had approached the table, regarding Woodcock with a fatherly interest watered with astonishment, and a patient demand for explanation. His right hand, holding the envelope, rested on the table. Woodcock took this in out of the corner of his eye. He also took in the flame of a spirit-lamp burning beneath the hot-water urn on the table. Then he rose with the air of having thoroughly digested the letter, and, facing the Major, held out his hand. The Major, always ready to grasp the hand of an Armstrong, dropped the envelope on the table.

“My dear Major,” he said, shaking the proffered hand vigorously, “this is no joke; it’s all plain sailing.”

Here he paused, and taking a cigar-case from his pocket, offered the Major one of his own Imperiales.

“I’m glad of that,” returned the Major, selecting one. “It would have been a silly joke at best. Explain, dear boy.”

“Nothing easier,” exclaimed Woodcock, biting the end off a cigar —“nothing easier, I assure you.”

Here he took up the envelope, and twisting it into a taper, applied it to the flame of the spirit-lamp.

“You see, it was this way,” he went on, applying the burning paper to the

Major's cigar. "When I arrived in London"—here he withdrew the flame to his own cigar-end and talked between the puffs—"I—was a—little at sea—about the——"

Here the paper almost burnt his fingers, and he turned and laid it, still burning, in the grate, as he continued, "about the dates you know."

"I posted this letter to you three or four days ago, though I see my date was wrong—several days ahead of the almanac, in fact. I then changed my mind, and arrived the next morning. There was no joke at all. It's the wretched postal officials you should get at, Major. Why, if a letter was delayed three or four days in India somebody would be hanged."

"Extraordinary!" gasped the Major. "Three or four days for a letter to reach here from London! What can they be thinking of?"

"Oh, that's nothing," responded Woodcock, airily. "Look at the way the railways treat the luggage. Can you believe it, Major? I left my luggage in London, with explicit directions for it to be sent on here by the evening train, and do you think it has arrived yet? No; and it never will arrive as long as English officials have double chins and treble waistcoats!"

"Scandalous!" cried the Major. "I must see into it. I'll make them attend to the business in hand. And there, again—what about the telegram? You say you sent a telegram; I've not received it. Valentine what about that telegram?"

In answer to her guardian's stern look of inquiry Valentine asserted that no such telegram had reached the house. Woodcock realised that it was rather a large order to impugn the railway company, the Post Office, and the telegraph office in one comprehensive sweep, but there was nothing else for it.

"Exactly," he said. "What did I tell you? England's played out. Letters—luggage—telegrams. I never heard anything like it! British officialdom in England is rotten, Major—rotten!"

After storming for a full ten minutes against railway, post, and telegraph, the Major went away vowing vengeance on all of them, without respect of caste, sex, creed, or colour. In angry mood he sought the Colonel's room, with the letter in his hand.

"Eh? What—what—what?" said the Colonel, sitting up in bed and practising gymnastics with his eyelids. "Have you found 49?"

"Found 49? No. It's quite right what Walter says; England's effete. The railway companies lose luggage, the Post Office delivers letters when it likes, and the telegraph office pockets the money for telegrams and never sends them. And if I wanted to hurt your feelings, I should go on to say that the gaols lose their prisoners and never find them again."

"I'd give worlds to know what you're talking about," replied the Colonel,

yawning.

Then the Major explained everything in his fulminating way, winding up by submitting the letter for inspection.

"H'm!" said the Colonel, when he'd read it through. "Where's the envelope?"

"The envelope? Oh, I know; we lighted our cigars with it."

"Then you've got no redress against the Post Office. How are you going to prove that the letter wasn't posted yesterday?"

The Major looked crestfallen.

"I never thought of that," he said. Then, after a pause, he added, "But the telegram?"

"Ah, there you can prove matters. If that telegram was sent, there should be a copy of it at the Avington post office."

"That's so," returned the Major, brightening.

"I'll go up and tackle them—the scoundrels!"

In less than half an hour the Major came downstairs. Encountering Baylis putting some books away in the library, he inquired for Mr. Armstrong, only to be told that he had gone out.

The Major accordingly marched off to the Avington telegraph office, and soon ascertained that Armstrong's telegram had duly arrived, and been delivered to a gentleman at the gate of the Grange. Then, returning with this information and a copy of the telegram to the Colonel, whom he found meditating in the library, he put the matter before him. Finally they worked it out that the date on the telegram did not admit of its being mentioned in a letter which was claimed to be written at least two days earlier.

They looked at each other, and could not make it out. At last the Colonel's detective instinct came to the rescue.

"Look here," he said: "there's something deuced mysterious in all this. Do you know, I believe that the sender of this telegram is some rascally impostor trying to palm himself off as Walter Armstrong."

"What?" roared the Major. "Explain yourself, Colonel."

"What I mean is this," protested the Colonel. "There's some swindler in London who's learnt that you're expecting a man you've never seen. What would be easier than for him to impersonate that man?"

"If he had reason to think the real man was not here already, yes; but——"

"Well," chipped in the Colonel, "in my opinion the best thing you can do is to send Baylis up to the hotel mentioned in this telegram. Let him ask for Mr. Armstrong, and bring him down by the next train."

“That’s it!” exclaimed the Major. “We’ll bring the rascal face to face with Walter and expose him. I’ll give Baylis instructions to treat him with all the respect due to Walter, and to bring him down on the grounds that I’m dying to see him.”

“That’s it!” cried the Colonel, rubbing his hands. “That’s it, old boy!”

And the Major hurried off to find Baylis.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BAYLIS GOES TO TOWN.

FOLLOWING swift on the decision arrived at by the Major and the Colonel came the dispatch of the trusty Baylis to London.

"Now, Baylis," said the Major, as he pushed him out at the front door, "you understand what will happen to you if you come back without him, don't you?"

"Don't you have no manner of fear, sir," returned Baylis. "If he exists old Baylis will bring him, sir."

"Yes; and mind you treat him as if he were really our Mr. Armstrong—just as if you had never seen the real one. Give him of the best, Baylis—I mean promise him, you know—and we'll enlighten him when he gets here."

Baylis looked as if he was winking inwardly.

"I think I take your meanin', sir," he replied.

"Very well. Now be off, and don't forget to wire me what time you are arriving."

So Baylis went forth on his errand.

"We'll have some fun out of this," remarked the Major, re-entering the library, where the Colonel was glancing through the morning paper. "Do you know, I really believe that Walter did not recognise that letter when first I showed it him?"

"From which you gather——?" queried the Colonel rising.

"Why, that he simply realised that he must have written it—probably on a merry evening when, as you know, Colonel—as we all know—things pass easily out of the memory."

"That's possible. With you, I shouldn't be at all surprised to learn that it was written by some scalliwag of an impersonator, and not by Walter at all."

"Colonel," cried the Major, rapping the table with his knuckles, "I'm convinced of it. We shall have some fun. 'Sh! Not a word to Walter—not a word! Nor to Valentine either."

"Why not to Miss Woods?" asked the Colonel, in some surprise.

"Why not?" was the reply. "Because I've forbidden her to speak to Walter alone, and she'd go straight and tell him all about it as soon as my back was

turned. Finesse, dear boy—diplomacy! You know my plans for both of them."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Colonel, slapping his friend on the back. "Forbidden fruit, eh? There's nothing like it; it always works. Why, I'll bet you the gaol to a ginger-nut they're meeting somewhere down in the garden now."

"I only hope they are," responded the Major, warmly. "I shan't interrupt them."

Some little time later the Colonel took his leave to attend to his duties at the gaol. The Major had promised to ring him up as soon as he got Baylis's telegram—provided, of course, that the telegraph officials were alive and well—and the Colonel, for his part, had agreed to drive over in his motor and see the fun. They had both got the idea fast-rooted in their minds that some rascally villain, primed up with all the details of Walter's history, manners, and customs, was attempting to oust the poor boy from his rightful place; and it was easy to see that whatever fresh incident happened, it would be made to fit in with and strengthen this preconceived view.

As the day wore on the Major went about the house chuckling. Was it that he thought that Valentine had broken through his stern decree, and was spending her time surreptitiously with the "forbidden fruit?" Or was it that he was looking forward to the exposure of an arch-impostor?

Had it been the former, it would have been very wide of the mark, for Valentine was up in her room, filling her diary with all the longings of her tender heart for "darling Jack," while Woodcock was lying beneath the pear-tree, fast asleep.

At about noon Woodcock awoke, feeling refreshed, and strolled up to the house, where the Major was still chuckling.

"Well, Major," he said by way of greeting, as he entered the library, "did you pass a pleasant night?"

"Never better, my boy," returned the Major, rising, and grasping Woodcock's hand and shaking it as if it were a pump handle. "My word, though, you've got a strong head, Walter! Ah, just like your father—just like your father!"

Woodcock did not reply at once. He detected a certain suppressed roguishness about the Major's manner which struck him as peculiar. The only thing his alert mind could suggest was that the Major imagined he had been meeting Valentine on the sly. This was a thing that he would amuse himself by fostering. Accordingly, after a pause, he remarked:

"Oh, yes, I inherited a good head all right." Then, as he averted his eyes and sighed slightly, he added, with a sheepish evasiveness and a subtle

assumption of deceitfulness in putting the question, “By the way, what has become of Valentine?”

By way of answer the Major laid both hands on his shoulders and shook him as Samson might have shaken the gate-posts of Gath before walking off with them.

“You dog, you!” he said. “Oh, you dog!”

“What do you mean, Major?” asked Woodcock, with a transparent attempt at amazement.

“What do I mean? Ah, Valentine, here you are!”

The latter part of his remark was a digression, for Valentine had entered the room while he was speaking. She made some laughing rejoinder, to hide her thoughts of “darling Jack,” and wondered when lunch would be ready.

Now, it is a strange thing that when a man—especially a man of advanced years—gets an idea into his head every little thing seems to argue for that idea. In this case the Major thought that Valentine and his brother officer’s son understood each other perfectly. Woodcock saw this, and with a twinkle of his eye decided to foster the Major’s conclusion. He assumed the attitude and manners of a young man who has lately been introduced into the paradise of a young girl’s affections; and what with an occasional furtive glance at Valentine during the idle talk which followed, and an occasional air of abstraction, he was most convincing. From that time forward the Major was the proudest man alive, to think that his cherished object was in a fair way to be accomplished. And there was still the chuckle at the back of his eyes when he thought of the exciting little time he had planned for the rascally impersonator whom Baylis had been sent to fetch.

Woodcock, maliciously contriving to create a natural part for Valentine in this comedy, managed to drop a sly word into Valentine’s ear to the effect that if he liked he could tell her something about “darling Jack.” The result of this was that she followed him about wistfully with her eyes for a long time, lingering with him shyly when the gong sounded for lunch, and behaving generally as if he were the one man in the universe she wanted to speak to privately.

Lunch over, Woodcock took the opportunity to stroll down into the garden, with a grin on his lips and a lighted cigar between them. Valentine became restless, and sought an excuse for leaving the room. The Major slapped his thigh, and said it was all right. Then, going upstairs, he looked out at a top window that commanded a view of the garden, and before very long caught a glimpse of Valentine making a hurried detour round the outskirts of the garden.

“I knew it,” he said, shaking hands with himself. “The Colonel was right. There’s nothing like forbidden fruit. My word! There’s very little doubt now. Major, you’re a marvel!”

CHAPTER XXXV.

"MR. ARMSTRONG, SIR."

IN less than an hour after the Major had congratulated himself on his cleverness the promised telegram from Baylis arrived.

He took it in himself, and marvelled at the promptness of the telegraph officials as he opened it.

"No answer," he said to the boy when he had read it. Then, as he closed the door and returned to the library, he added to himself, "By the three-thirty train. That's all right. Quick work, by Jove! There are two marvels in this house—myself and Baylis."

Without wasting any time, the Major took his hat and stick and walked into Avington, where he telephoned to the Colonel to be on hand at the time named. Then he returned to the Grange, where he gave orders for Jarvis to meet the three-thirty train with the dogcart, after which he sat and smoked and waited, enjoying a threefold satisfaction. In the first place, Valentine and his brother officer's son were alone in the romantic old garden; in the second, Baylis was leading the greatest rascal unhung by the nose to the scene of his utter exposure; and in the third, the Colonel was hastening to see the fun. It pleased the Major immensely. It was enough to make even a brigadier-general take a hopeful view of life.

Meanwhile Woodcock's way with Valentine in the garden was subservient to his grasp of the situation. He promised a lot, but told her very little.

They were standing where she had found him, beneath the great pear-tree, and she was still coaxing him to tell her all he knew.

"My dear girl," he said, for the twentieth time, "if I told you where he was you'd go and spoil everything."

"I won't, Mr. Armstrong—I won't, really. Do tell me where he is, so that I can write to him."

She placed her hand on his arm, and beseeched him with her eyes. But he shook his head and laughed.

"No, no," he persisted; "I promised that I would not tell. It's a mysterious affair altogether, and there's someone else involved." This not only served to inflame Valentine's curiosity, but aroused all kinds of other feelings as well.

Someone else involved? Oh,

this was too much!

"Mr. Armstrong," she pleaded, looking very pretty in her emotion, "if you don't tell me I shall——"

"Cry," he suggested, smiling at her.

"Cry? No, I shall not cry; I shall go raving mad. Tell me—tell me—tell me!"

She gripped him by the sleeve of his coat, and, setting her teeth, flashed her eyes at him as if she would read the secret.

But Woodcock only smiled approvingly at her, and said:

"Jove! I didn't think you had so much go in you!"

"Oh, you are cruel!" cried Valentine, releasing her hold of his sleeve to wring her hands. "You've no heart; you don't care. Really, I can't see why——"

"Look here," broke in Woodcock, who was beginning to feel sorry for her, "I'm only acting for your good. You know you can never marry him; you know the Major's ideas about it."

Valentine looked at him viciously and turned pale; but her eyes glowed; then her cheeks suffused a rosy red as she flashed out:

"What do I care for the Major's ideas? D'you think I'm ever going to marry you? Never! I'd sooner die first!"

"Dying is a small thing," returned Woodcock. "For my part, I'd sooner live

for a million years on a pound a week than marry you, my dear."

Valentine turned away and relapsed into a sulky silence. Woodcock now felt sorry.

"Listen to me," he said. "I'm not going to tell you what I know, but I will tell you this: you shall marry the man you love, and, mark my words, soon—very soon—you shall see him. Is that good enough for you?"

She looked at him in wonder. Then she turned and faced him.

"Is that true?" she asked, brightening.

"Yes, perfectly true."

"Then I won't ask any more questions. I believe you know something and can do what you say."

Woodcock knew plenty, but whether he could carry out his promise was a trifle doubtful. However, he put a bold face on the matter.

"You are right," he said. Then added, playfully, "And I am to be best man?"

"Yes, yes," she replied, almost clapping her hands.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Very well. Now run off up to the house, and, for Heaven's sake, don't worry me any more about these trifles."

She extended her hand, and as he grasped it a laughing look passed between them. In another moment she was hastening towards the house by the way she had come, and Woodcock remained where he was, wondering vaguely how he could possibly bring about what he had so lightly promised. It was true he could easily bring "darling Jack" on to the scene at any moment; but unless the pair actually eloped he did not quite see how the second part of his promise was to be fulfilled. The Major was not altogether the sort of man to be turned from his purpose. He knew that only too well. Bah! The inspiration would come to him. It always did. So he strolled up and down the bank with his cigar between his teeth, with an idea of smoking it out before returning to the house. Even the sound of the Colonel's motor driving in at the gates and pulling up at the front door did not hurry him. He was thinking deeply for once, and laying his mind out to help "darling Jack" and Valentine, and so compensate them for all the trouble he had caused. But while he so thought out his laudable intention he winked occasionally at space and indulged in that peculiar smile of his, as if nothing could dull the humour of the situation in which he had placed himself.

In the drawing-room in the Grange the Major and the Colonel were sitting

alone, conversing in low tones.

"You mean that you will keep up the farce as long as possible?" the Colonel was saying.

"Certainly, my dear Colonel. I shall greet him with all the effusion of my ebullient nature, put him at his ease—that is, if Walter does not come in and spoil it——"

"Spoil it?" exclaimed the Colonel. "Why, it would only add to the fun. Gad! it'll be a treat to see his face when he realises the rascality of the interloper. Why, we might even pretend we think that he is the interloper."

"Capital!" replied the Major. "That would be really funny. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes," pursued the Colonel, warming up to his idea. "And then we'll talk about Armstrong's father, and you can pretend that the interloper knows more about him than Armstrong himself does. There's a stage scene for you! Ho, ho, ho! Major we really ought to write a play."

The Major was about to reply, when wheels were heard grinding the gravel of the drive. The two sprang to their feet and looked out at the window. There was the Colonel's motor, empty, for he had driven it himself; and there was Jarvis pulling in the horse behind it; and there, again, in the dogcart sat Baylis and a big, heavy, clean-shaven individual with several pieces of luggage.

"My word!" said the Colonel. "He's come to stay, Major!"

"It looks like it," returned the Major. "What a cool-faced villain, to be sure!"

They retreated into the room, and presently there came a ring at the door-bell. As one of the maids hurried to the door the military pair seated themselves and looked at each other in suspense.

"Now for it, Major!"

"Ah, now for it, Colonel!"

In another moment the door opened, and Baylis announced, in a voice of cold irony:

“Mr. Armstrong, sir, if you can grasp my meanin’.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GAME IS UP.

WITH heavy strides the man from India came into the room. His countenance was jovial enough, but it was of that Henry VIII. type which sums up the pleasure-loving animal instincts in a long nose, beady blue eyes, and a voluptuous mouth.

To the Major and the Colonel, who had made up their minds on the whole matter, the aspect of the man showed plainly that, as a rascal, they had underestimated him, if anything. But they had their *rôles* cut and dried. While Armstrong stood for a moment, looking from one to the other, trying to make up his mind which was his father's friend, the Major advanced towards him with well-assumed smiles of recognition, and, placing a hand on each shoulder, gave him the same kind of hearty welcome he had formerly accorded to Woodcock.

"Walter, my lad," he said, "you're right welcome, you are. My word! You're a bigger fellow than your father, but not a better, that I'll wager! A better man than your father never stepped, my lad—never."

"You're right, Major," returned Armstrong. "My father was the best of men, though that's what he used to say about you."

"Cht! cht! cht!" protested the Major. "He always admired my proportions, and all that; and, of course, his misfortune in losing an arm at Candahar, and having a wooden arm attached——"

"A wooden arm?" cried Armstrong, in amazement. "What do you mean, Major? My father never had a wooden arm attached."

The Major looked slyly at the Colonel, as much as to say that this impostor did not know even the barest facts about his dear brother officer. Then, turning again to Armstrong, he said:

"Can't you recall it? the fight your father had with the two tigers?"

Armstrong looked puzzled, and they thought he did it remarkably well.

"I can't recall any fight with two tigers," he said. "Somebody must have been spinning you yarns."

This, delivered with a smile, though with a natural shiftiness of gaze, impressed both the Major and the Colonel with a certain amount of amazement

at the line of bluff which this cool impostor had evidently mapped out for himself. The facts that he had gleaned he would stand by, but those he did not know he was prepared to explain away as wild travellers' tales.

"Well, well," said the Major, lightly, "I expect I've been misinformed." Then, to change the subject, he introduced Armstrong to his good friend, Colonel Smyth-Walton, governor of the gaol.

"Ah," said Armstrong, as he shook hands, "we have met before, in the billiard-room at ——'s Hotel."

The Colonel admitted it with a bow, but did not revert to the circumstances. Neither did Armstrong.

"And now, Walter, my lad," said the Major, in his large way, when the three were seated, "I've got a bone to pick with you. I went to Brindisi to meet you, but you were not on the boat. I was very disappointed."

"Well, you see," began Armstrong, and then hesitated, as his shifty eyes roved the carpet. "You see," he went on, "I came by the earlier boat, and ran short of money on the way, you know, stopped at Malta a bit, and finally came round by way of Gibraltar."

"I see," replied the Major; and then there was silence, during which the Colonel twisted his bristling moustache and glared beneath his shaggy eyebrows at what he deemed the clumsiest lump of audacity he had seen for many a long day.

"Of course," went on Armstrong, "if I had known you were coming to meet me I should have been there; but I didn't know."

"Quite right, my lad," returned the Major. "But I thought I would give you a surprise. It was a pity—a great pity! Here, you'll find your father's photo in that, I think."

As he spoke he handed him an album from a side table. This was a test he had not put to Woodcock; but, then, he had not doubted Woodcock as he did this new-comer.

Armstrong took the album and slowly turned over the leaves, the other two watching him in silence.

"Ah, here it is!" he said at length, pausing and regarding the photograph intently. "And it's a very good one."

The Major rose and looked over his shoulder. He saw that the correct photograph had been found, and telegraphed the fact to the Colonel with a nod.

"H'm! Very well primed up," was the Colonel's mental comment.

"Yes," went on Armstrong, "I remember the day he had it taken." Then he went on to mention certain little details which called the occasion to his mind.

“H’m!” thought the Colonel again. “Exceedingly well primed up;” and a meaning glance at the Major induced very much the same thought in him.

Then the talk became desultory, and as the two felt that their impostor had rather the best of it for the moment, they waited for the development which they felt must come sooner or later.

It came rather soon—in fact, right between a question of the Major’s and an answer from Armstrong.

“And London? This, I understand, is the first time you have set foot on English soil.”

The Major’s speech was barely begun, when the door opened and Woodcock appeared on the threshold. There he hesitated a moment, not recognising Armstrong, who was seated with his back towards the door. But he heard his reply:

“Yes, the first time on English soil. I’m new to London, and London’s new to me.”

As he finished speaking he looked up sideways and saw Woodcock moving past him into the centre of the room. Feeling that this was some member of the family to whom he was to be introduced, he rose to his feet. The Major rose also; and as the two faced each other he said, with extreme politeness, as he indicated Woodcock, “Mr. Walter Armstrong—Mr. Walter Armstrong.” Then, facing Woodcock and waving his hand at Armstrong, he added, with a still more insinuating politeness, “Mr. Walter Armstrong—Mr. Walter Armstrong.”

The Major and the Colonel had designed this for effect, and they got more out of it than they had expected, for the expressions on the faces of the two claimants to the name and personality of Armstrong were a study. That each recognised the other was plain; and that each was startled was equally plain. But of the two Armstrong looked the more puzzled. The Major’s cool introduction of another man under his own name was, to say the least of it, a trifle bewildering.

But this play of expression was packed into the first moment their eyes met. The next was occupied by two remarks, jerked out almost simultaneously.

“You are——” said Armstrong.

“You are——” said Woodcock.

And there they both stopped, each unwilling to say who and what the other was. But there was a menace in the eyes of both as they glared.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

EXIT THE RASCAL.

SUDDENLY WOODCOCK controlled himself, and, turning to the Major, said, in a voice which, considering that he was speaking and acting in the dark, was remarkably even:

"Major, what does this mean?"

"Goodness knows!" returned the Major. "You both describe yourselves as Mr. Walter Armstrong, so I thought I would introduce you as such. You must settle it between you, though, I must say, to me it would be extremely interesting to know which is my Mr. Armstrong, and which is—well, let us say the Colonel's."

Woodcock detected a friendly look in the Major's eyes as they met his; and, guessing that the game might still be in his favour, resolved to play it for all it was worth.

Facing Armstrong, he cried, with well-pitched indignation:

"You scoundrel! Do you mean to say that you have come here with the idea of taking my rightful place, assuming my name, and obtaining the hospitality of my host under false pretences? The game's up, my man. I know more of you than I care to say; but I never imagined that you would resort to a move like this."

Armstrong turned pale, and in his wrath and bewilderment he choked once or twice in the attempt to speak. Then he hissed between his teeth:

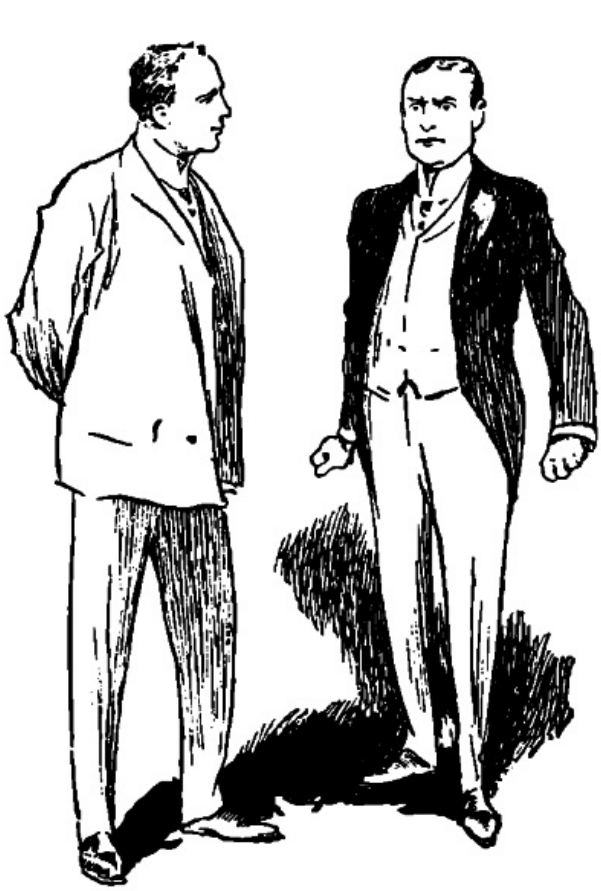
"You—you embezzling thief! You gaol-bird! You—you talk to me like this? How did you escape before your time? Ah, I see it now!"

Then, facing round on the Major and the Colonel, he went on, stretching his finger at Woodcock:

"This man is a fraud—an impostor—a thief! Three years ago I called at the office of his employer in Cheapside, and——"

"This man," broke in Woodcock, for it was now his turn to point the finger at Armstrong, "is a liar! Did you not hear him say, as I entered the room, that he had never been in London before?"

Armstrong winced, and cut a sorry figure before the accusing glances of the whole three—nay, four.



Valentine had just entered the room, and now stood condemning him at sight.

The Colonel was the first to break the pause in the progress of the comedy. He advanced to Woodcock, and touched him on the arm to get his attention.

"This man certainly seemed to recognise you," he said. "How on earth——"

"My dear Colonel," interrupted Woodcock, suavely, "for the third time in our friendship I am amused. Surely to goodness the fact that others beside yourself have recognised me is sufficient to prove to you beyond question that I am No. 49 lately escaped from gaol. Why, can't you see, man, that this fellow"—with a full-arm sweep of contempt in the direction of Armstrong—"has either seen a picture of No. 49 or was shown a photo of him by that detective over a drink or two, and now, thinking to bluff both of you, and me, too, jumps to conclusions? Can't you see that?"

"Of course," exclaimed the Colonel. "Forgive me, dear boy. I see it all now. The man's a scoundrel, and a subtle one."

The Major not understanding the allusion to No. 49, stood looking from one to the other in perplexity; but Valentine, who guessed something of the matter, spoke up.

"What is it?" she said. "Is this—this gentleman saying anything against Mr. Armstrong?"

"Only that he's just escaped from gaol," said the Major. "That's all, my dear."

"How absurd!" returned Valentine, scornfully. "The man must be mad!"

“Mad?” snapped Armstrong, who had recovered himself sufficiently to defend his position. “It is you—all three of you—who are mad.”

The Colonel laughed.

“Yes,” went on Armstrong, “you may laugh; but when I show you what fools this man has made of you all, you won’t feel like laughing.”

“Be so good as to show us,” said the Major, loftily, as he folded his arms.

“Yes, prove it!” said the Colonel, thrusting his hands deep into his trousers pockets. Valentine gasped; Woodcock only smiled.

“Well,” said Armstrong, “I think my luggage will prove it.”

“YOUR luggage?” cried Woodcock, with an awful frown. “If you mean the luggage in the hall, it’s mine—or some of mine. I’d like to know how you got hold of it, and what you’ve done with the rest of it.”

Armstrong set his teeth and glared upon Woodcock, clenching and unclenching his hands in rage. Then he laughed angrily.

“Ha, ha, ha! You can lie,” he cried, “but you cannot tell us what is in any of those boxes.”

“I can tell you what was in them,” replied Woodcock, quietly. “Goodness only knows what’s in them now.”

Armstrong was foiled again, and a glance at the listeners told him that he had not advanced his case one jot. Still, he returned to the charge with a fresh idea.

“My letters!” he cried, turning to the Major. “My letters to you—have you kept them?”

“I have,” returned the Major. “They are locked in a drawer of my writing-desk, of which I carry the only key.”

“Very well. Will you be so good as to get those letters? I know what is in them; this fellow here does not.”

Woodcock felt uneasy, but he did not show it.

“That’s a bold claim,” he said. “Major, will you lead the way to the library?”

“Certainly,” returned the Major. “Come along, all of you.”

At that moment there came a violent ring and a prolonged rat-tat-tat at the hall door. It was opened almost immediately by Baylis, who had evidently been listening outside the drawing-room. Then, as the Major passed into the hall, followed by the others, in rushed Hardwicke, no longer bedraggled, but looking smart. The tramp sidled in after him, conscious of his rags.

“Major Woods,” cried Hardwicke, excitedly, “I’ve come to warn you. You

have a scoundrel—an impostor—in your house!”

At sight of her “darling Jack” Valentine caught her breath, and, her knees failing her, she sank upon the hall floor, where, unnoticed in the excitement, she rocked to and fro in the effort to overcome a tendency to hysterics. The Major, facing Hardwicke, frowned upon him sternly. For a moment he seemed to be congratulating himself on not having the pleasure of knowing him. Then he replied:

“We are aware of that fact, sir—quite aware of it.”

“What?” cried Hardwicke. “You know that you have an escaped convict here”—he pointed at Woodcock—“and you take it so calmly?”

“Well, I’m hanged!” said the Colonel. “Here’s another of them!”

“Funny, isn’t it?” laughed Woodcock, quietly, though he knew now that the game was up.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, sir,” said the Major to Hardwicke, “but you and your—your friend—well, I will not detain you. Gentlemen, follow me; we will get those letters.”

With that he turned on his heel and strode for the library, followed by the Colonel, Armstrong, and Woodcock, who brought up the rear. At the door of the library he turned and saw Hardwicke gathering Valentine up—saw her throw her arms round his neck, and heard her say, “Oh, Jack, Jack!” He saw Baylis and the tramp standing by, and then caught sight of the motor through the open doorway.

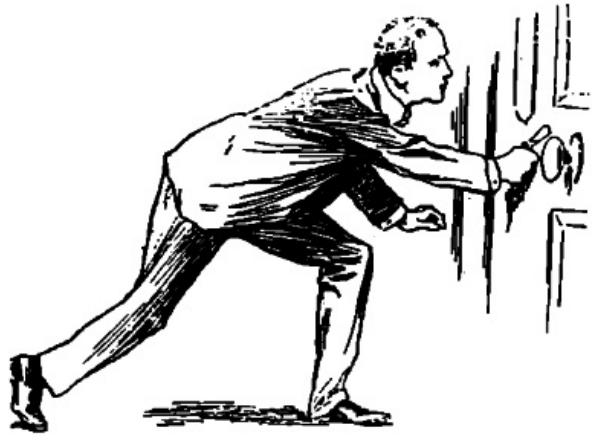
Woodcock never took long to make up his mind. He knew very well that the letters would put an end to his bluffing, and that Hardwicke and the tramp between them could bowl him out; and there, in that moment’s pause in the open doorway, his plan was formed.

He heard the Major’s key rattle in the lock of his writing-desk. But there was another key in the business—a key that was within his grasp. He looked down, and found it ready to his hand on the outside of the door.

“Good-bye, Colonel! Good-bye, Major!” he cried, as he grasped handle and key and, quickly drawing the door to, locked the three inside. In his haste he did not forget the key and the possibility that one of the four in the hall might turn it again. He withdrew it, and put it in his pocket.

“Hardwicke,” he cried, rushing up the hall towards the door, “I am Convict 49; that is Armstrong in the library. He is guilty of the crime for which I was sent to gaol.”

He spoke quickly as he ran, and now stood in the doorway, while the four regarded him with speechless amazement.



"Listen," he went on. "You can never marry Miss Woods unless Armstrong is bowled out, and I can do it. Is not this what I promised?"

He addressed his question to Valentine, who lifted her hands to her head in bewilderment and dizziness.

"Yes," she replied, faintly. "You did, but—but —— Oh, I can't believe it!" Then her reeling form demanded all "darling Jack's" attention.

At this moment the three inside the library had evidently come to the conclusion that they had been tricked, for they began to shout and batter at the door. Loud cries of "Baylis! Baylis!" came from the Major; but Baylis had staggered back against the wall, and was staring helplessly at Woodcock.

"Hardwicke, I will write to you," cried Woodcock; "I have your address. Good-bye, all of you." Then he turned in the doorway and dashed for the Colonel's motor.

The only one to follow was the tramp, who arrived at the side of the car just as Woodcock was moving off.

"Them socks, guv'ner!" he cried, running alongside.

"Buy yourself another pair," replied Woodcock, as he flung some coins on to the gravel.

Then, with a ringing laugh that set at least two pairs of ears tingling within the house, he sped away into the infinite, until we lose him in a cloud of dust somewhere on the western horizon.

FINIS.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *The Genial Rascal* by Reginald Hodder and Alfred Walter Barrett (pseud. R. Andom.)]