

Marsh Richard

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THE LOST DUCHESS

CHAPTER I THE DUCHESS IS LOST

"Has the Duchess returned?"

Knowles came further into the room. He had a letter on a salver. When the Duke had taken it, Knowles still lingered. The Duke glanced at him.

"Is an answer required?"

"No, your Grace." Still Knowles lingered. "Something a little singular has happened. The carriage has returned without the Duchess, and the men say that they thought her Grace was in it."

"What do you mean?"

"I hardly understand myself, your Grace. Perhaps you would like to see Barnes."

Barnes was the coachman.

"Send him up." When Knowles had gone, and he was alone, his Grace showed signs of being slightly annoyed. He looked at his watch. "I told her she'd better be in by four. She says that she's not feeling well, and yet one would think that she was not aware of the fatigue entailed in having the Prince to dinner, and a mob of people to follow. I particularly wished her to lie down for a couple of hours."

Knowles ushered in not only Barnes, the coachman, but Moysey, the footman, too. Both these persons seemed to be ill at ease. The Duke glanced at them sharply. In his voice there was a suggestion of impatience.

"What is the matter?"

Barnes explained as best he could.

"If you please, your Grace, we waited for the Duchess outside Cane and Wilson's, the drapers. The Duchess came out, got into the carriage, and Moysey shut the door, and her Grace said, 'Home!' and yet when we got home she wasn't there."

"She wasn't where?"

"Her Grace wasn't in the carriage, your Grace."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Her Grace did get into the carriage; you shut the door, didn't you?"

Barnes turned to Moysey. Moysey brought his hand up to his brow in a sort of military salute—he had been a soldier in the regiment in which, once upon a time, the Duke had been a subaltern:

"She did. The Duchess came out of the shop. She seemed rather in a hurry, I thought. She got into the carriage, and she said, 'Home, Moysey!' I shut the door, and Barnes drove straight home. We never stopped anywhere, and we never noticed nothing happen on the way; and yet when we got home the carriage was empty."

The Duke stared.

"Do you mean to tell me that the Duchess got out of the carriage while you were driving full pelt through the streets without saying anything to you, and without you noticing it?"

"The carriage was empty when we got home, your Grace."

"Was either of the doors open?"

"No, your Grace."

"You fellows have been up to some infernal mischief. You have made a mess of it. You never picked up the Duchess, and you're trying to palm this tale off on to me to save yourselves."

Barnes was moved to adjuration:

"I'll take my Bible oath, your Grace, that the Duchess got into the carriage outside Cane and Wilson's."

Moysey seconded his colleague:

"I will swear to that, your Grace. She got into the carriage, and I shut the door, and she said, 'Home, Moysey!'"

The Duke looked as if he did not know what to make of the story and its tellers.

"What carriage did you have?"

"Her Grace's brougham, your Grace."

Knowles interposed:

"The brougham was ordered because I understood that the Duchess was not feeling very well, and there's rather a high wind, your Grace."

The Duke snapped at him:

"What has that to do with it? Are you suggesting that the Duchess was more likely to jump out of a brougham while it was dashing through the streets than out of any other kind of vehicle?"

The Duke's glance fell on the letter which Knowles had brought him when he first had entered. He had placed it on his writing-table. Now he took it up. It was addressed:

"To His Grace

"The Duke of Datchet.

"Private!

"Very Pressing!!!"

The name was written in a fine, clear, almost feminine hand. The words in the left-hand corner of the envelope were written in a different hand. They were large and bold; almost as though they had been painted with the end of the penholder instead of being written with the pen. The envelope itself was of an unusual size, and bulged out as though it contained something else besides a letter.

The Duke tore the envelope open. As he did so something fell out of it on to the writing-table. It looked as though it was a lock of a woman's hair. As he glanced at it the Duke seemed to be a trifle startled. The Duke read the letter:

"Your Grace will be so good as to bring five hundred pounds (£500) in gold to the Piccadilly end of the Burlington Arcade within an hour of the receipt of this. The Duchess of Datchet has been kidnapped. An imitation duchess got into the carriage, which was waiting outside Cane and Wilson's and she alighted on the road. Unless your Grace does as you are requested the Duchess of Datchet's left-hand little finger will be at once cut off, and sent home in time to receive the Prince to dinner. Other portions of her Grace will follow. A lock of her Grace's hair is enclosed with this as an earnest of our good intentions.

"*Before 5.30 p. m.* your Grace is requested to be at the Piccadilly end of the Burlington Arcade with five hundred pounds (£500) in gold. You will there be accosted by an individual in a white top-hat, and with a gardenia in his button-hole. You will be entirely at liberty to give him into custody, or to have him followed by the police. In which case the Duchess's left arm, cut off at the shoulder, will be sent home for dinner-not to mention other extremely possible contingencies. But you are *advised* to give the individual in question the five hundred pounds in gold, because in that case the Duchess herself will be home in time to receive the Prince to dinner, and with one of the best stories with which to entertain your distinguished guests they ever heard.

"Remember! *not later than 5.30*, unless you wish to receive her Grace's little finger."

The Duke stared at this amazing epistle when he had read it as though he had found it difficult to believe the evidence of his eyes. He was not a demonstrative person as a rule, but this little communication astonished even him. He read it again. Then his hands dropped to his sides and he swore.

He took up the lock of hair which had fallen out of the envelope. Was it possible that it could be his wife's, the Duchess? Was it possible that a Duchess of Datchet could be kidnapped, in broad daylight, in the heart of London, and be sent home, as it were, in pieces? Had sacrilegious hands already been playing pranks with that great lady's hair? Certainly, *that* hair was so like *her* hair that the mere resemblance made his Grace's blood run cold. He turned on Messrs. Barnes and Moysey as though he would have liked to rend them:

"You scoundrels!"

He moved forward as though the intention had entered his ducal heart to knock his servants down. But, if that were so, he did not act quite up to his intention. Instead, he stretched out his arm, pointing at them as if he were an accusing spirit:

"Will you swear that it was the Duchess who got into the carriage outside Cane and Wilson's?"

Barnes began to stammer:

"I-I'll swear, your Grace, that I-I thought-"

The Duke stormed an interruption:

"I don't ask what you thought. I ask you, will you swear it was?"

The Duke's anger was more than Barnes could face. He was silent. Moysey showed a larger courage:

"Could have sworn that it was at the time, your Grace. But now it seems to me that it's a rummy go."

"A rummy go!" The peculiarity of the phrase did not seem to strike the Duke just then—at least, he echoed it as if it didn't. "You call it a rummy go! Do you know that I am told in this letter that the woman who had entered the carriage was not the Duchess? What you were thinking about, or what case you will be able to make out for yourselves, you know better than I; but I can tell you this—that in an hour you will leave my service, and you may esteem yourselves fortunate if, to-night, you are not both of you sleeping in gaol. Knowles! take these men to a room, and lock them in it, and set some one to see that they don't get out of it, and come back at once. You understand, at once—to me!"

Knowles did not give Messrs. Barnes and Moysey a chance to offer a remonstrance, even if they had been disposed to do so. He escorted them out of the room with a dexterity and a celerity which did him credit, and in a remarkably short space of time he returned to the ducal presence. He was the Duke's own servant—his own particular man. He was a little older than the Duke, and he had been his servant almost ever since the Duke had been old enough to have a servant of his very own. Probably James Knowles knew more than any living creature of the Duke's "secret history" — as they call it in the *chroniques scandaleuses*—of his little peculiarities, of his strong points, and his weak ones. And, in the possession of this knowledge, he had borne himself in a manner which had caused the Duke to come to look upon him as a man in whom he might have confidence—that confidence which a penitent has in a confessor—to look upon him as a trusted and a trustworthy friend.

When Knowles reappeared the Duke handed him the curious epistle with which he had been favoured.

"Read that, and tell me what you think of it."

Knowles read it. His countenance was even more of a mask than the Duke's. He evinced no sign of astonishment.

"I am inclined, your Grace, to think that it's a hoax."

"A hoax! I don't know what you call a hoax! That is not a hoax!" The Duke held out the lock of hair which had fallen from the envelope. "I have compared it with the hair in my locket, and it is the Duchess's hair."

"May I look at it?"

The Duke handed it to Knowles. Knowles examined it closely.

"It resembles her Grace's hair."

"Resembles! It is her hair."

Knowles still continued to reflect. He offered a suggestion.

"Shall I send for the police?"

"The police! What's the good of sending for the police? If what that letter says is true, by the time I have succeeded in making a thick-skulled constable understand what has happened the Duchess will be-will be mutilated!"

The Duke turned away as if the thought were frightful-as, indeed, it was.

"Is that all you can suggest?"

"Unless your Grace proposes taking the five hundred pounds."

One might almost have suspected that the words were spoken in irony. But before he could answer another servant entered, who also brought a letter for the Duke. When his Grace's glance fell on it he uttered an exclamation. The writing on the envelope was the same writing that had been on the envelope which had contained the very singular communication-like it in all respects down to the broomstick-end thickness of the "Private!" and "Very pressing!!!" in the corner.

"Who brought this?" stormed the Duke.

The servant appeared to be a little startled by the violence of his Grace's manner.

"A lady-or, at least, your Grace, she seemed to be a lady."

"Where is she?"

"She came in a hansom, your Grace. She gave me that letter, and said, 'Give that to the Duke of Datchet at once-without a moment's delay!' Then she got into the hansom again, and drove away."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"Your Grace!"

The man seemed surprised, as though the idea of stopping chance visitors to the ducal mansion *vi et armis* had not, until that moment, entered into his philosophy. The Duke continued to regard the man as if he could say a good deal, if he chose. Then he pointed to the door. His lips said nothing, but his gesture much. The servant vanished.

"Another hoax!" the Duke said, grimly, as he tore the envelope open.

This time the envelope contained a sheet of paper, and in the sheet of paper another envelope. The Duke unfolded the sheet of paper. On it some words were written. These:

"The Duchess appears so particularly anxious to drop you a line, that one really hasn't the heart to refuse her. Her Grace's communication-written amidst blinding tears! – you will find enclosed with this."

"Knowles," said the Duke, in a voice which actually trembled, "Knowles, hoax or no hoax, I will be even with the gentleman who wrote that."

Handing the sheet of paper to Mr. Knowles, his Grace turned his attention to the envelope which had been enclosed. It was a small square envelope, of the finest quality, and it reeked with perfume. The Duke's countenance assumed an added frown-he had no fondness for envelopes which were scented. In the centre of the envelope were the words "To the Duke of Datchet," written in the big, bold, sprawling hand which he knew so well.

"Mabel's writing," he said to himself, as, with shaking fingers, he tore the envelope open.

The sheet of paper which he took out was almost as stiff as cardboard. It, too, emitted what his Grace deemed the nauseous odours of the perfumer's shop.

On it was written this letter:

"My dear Hereward, – For Heaven's sake do what these people require! I don't know what has happened or where I am, but I am nearly distracted! They have already cut off some of my hair, and they tell me that, if you don't let them have five hundred pounds in gold by half-past five, they will cut off my little finger too. I would sooner die than lose my little finger-and-I don't know what else besides.

"By the token which I send you, and which has never, until now, been off my breast, I conjure you to help me. – MABEL.

"Hereward-*help me!*"

When he read that letter the Duke turned white-very white, as white as the paper on which it was written. He passed the epistle on to Knowles.

"I suppose that also is a hoax?"

He spoke in a tone of voice which was unpleasantly cold-a coldness which Mr. Knowles was aware, from not inconsiderable experience, betokened that the Duke was white-hot within.

Mr. Knowles's demeanour, however, betrayed no sign that he was aware of anything of the kind, he being conscious that there is a certain sort of knowledge which is apt, at times, to be dangerous to its possessor. He read the letter from beginning to end.

"This certainly does resemble her Grace's writing."

"You think it does resemble it, do you? You think that there is a certain faint and distant similarity?" The Duke asked these questions quietly-too quietly. Then, all at once, he thundered-which Mr. Knowles was quite prepared for-"Why, you idiot, don't you know it is her writing?"

Mr. Knowles gave way another point. He was, constitutionally, too much of a diplomatist to concede more than a point at a time.

"So far as appearances go, I am bound to admit that I think it possible that it is her Grace's writing."

Then the Duke let fly at him-at this perfectly innocent man. But, of course, Mr. Knowles was long since inured.

"Perhaps you would like me to send for an expert in writing? Or perhaps you would prefer that I should send for half-a-dozen? And by the time that they had sent in their reports, and you had reported on their reports, and they had reported on your report of their reports, and some one or other of you had made up his mind, the Duchess would be dead. Yes, sir, and you'd have murdered her!"

His Grace hurled this frightful accusation at Mr. Knowles, as if Mr. Knowles had been a criminal standing in the dock.

While the Duke had been collecting and discharging his nice derangement of epithets his fingers had been examining the interior of the envelope which had held the letter which purported to be written by his wife. When his fingers reappeared he was holding something between his first finger and his thumb. He glanced at this himself. Then he held it out towards Mr. Knowles.

Again his voice was trembling.

"If this letter is not from the Duchess, how came that to be in the envelope?"

Mr. Knowles endeavoured to see what the Duke was holding. It was so minute an object that it was a little difficult to make out exactly what it was, and the Duke appeared to be unwilling to let it go.

So his Grace explained:

"That is the half of a sixpence which I gave to the Duchess when I asked her to be my wife. You see it is pierced. I pierced that hole in it myself. As the Duchess says in this letter, and as I have reason to know, she has worn this broken sixpence from that hour to this. If this letter is not hers, how came this token in the envelope? How came any one to know, even, that she carried it?"

Mr. Knowles was silent. He still yielded to his constitutional disrelish to commit himself. At last he asked:

"What is it that your Grace proposes to do?"

The Duke spoke with a bitterness which almost suggested a personal animosity towards the inoffensive Mr. Knowles.

"I propose, with your permission, to release the Duchess from the custody of my estimable correspondent. I propose-always with your permission-to comply with his modest request, and to take him his five hundred pounds in gold." He paused, then continued in a tone which, coming from him, meant volumes: "Afterwards, I propose to cry quits with the concoctor of this pretty little hoax, even if it costs me every penny I possess. He shall pay more for that five hundred pounds than he supposes."

CHAPTER II SOUGHT

The Duke of Datchet, coming out of the bank, lingered for a moment on the steps. In one hand he carried a canvas bag, which seemed well weighted. On his countenance there was an expression which to a casual observer might have suggested that his Grace was not completely at his ease. That casual observer happened to come strolling by. It took the form of Ivor Dacre.

Mr. Dacre looked the Duke of Datchet up and down in that languid way he has. He perceived the canvas bag. Then he remarked, possibly intending to be facetious:

"Been robbing the bank? Shall I call a cart?"

Nobody minds what Ivor Dacre says. Besides, he is the Duke's own cousin. Perhaps a little removed; still, there it is. So the Duke smiled a sickly smile, as if Mr. Dacre's delicate wit had given him a passing touch of indigestion.

Mr. Dacre noticed that the Duke looked sallow, so he gave his pretty sense of humour another airing:

"Kitchen boiler burst? When I saw the Duchess just now I wondered if it had."

His Grace distinctly started. He almost dropped the canvas bag.

"You saw the Duchess just now, Ivor! When?"

The Duke was evidently moved. Mr. Dacre was stirred to languid curiosity.

"I can't say I clocked it. Perhaps half an hour ago; perhaps a little more."

"Half an hour ago! Are you sure? Where did you see her?"

Mr. Dacre wondered. The Duchess of Datchet could scarcely have been eloping in broad daylight. Moreover, she had not yet been married a year. Every one knew that she and the Duke were still as fond of each other as if they were not man and wife. So, although the Duke, for some cause or other, was evidently in an odd state of agitation, Mr. Dacre saw no reason why he should not make a clean breast of all he knew.

"She was going like blazes in a hansom cab."

"In a hansom cab? Where?"

"Down Waterloo Place."

"Was she alone?"

Mr. Dacre reflected. He glanced at the Duke out of the corners of his eyes. His languid utterance became a positive drawl:

"I rather fancy she wasn't."

"Who was with her?"

"My dear fellow, if you were to offer me the bank I couldn't tell you."

"Was it a man?"

Mr. Dacre's drawl became still more pronounced:

"I rather fancy that it was."

Mr. Dacre expected something. The Duke was so excited. But he by no means expected what actually came:

"Ivor, she's been kidnapped!"

Mr. Dacre did what he had never been known to do before within the memory of man—he dropped his eye-glass.

"Datchet!"

"She has! Some scoundrel has decoyed her away, and trapped her. He's already sent me a lock of her hair, and he tells me that if I don't let him have five hundred pounds in gold by half-past five he'll let me have her little finger."

Mr. Dacre did not know what to make of his Grace at all. He was a sober man-it *couldn't* be that! Mr. Dacre felt really concerned.

"I'll call a cab, old man, and you'd better let me see you home."

Mr. Dacre half raised his stick to hail a passing hansom. The Duke caught him by the arm.

"You ass! What do you mean? I am telling you the simple truth. My wife's been kidnapped."

Mr. Dacre's countenance was a thing to be seen-and remembered.

"Oh! I hadn't heard that there was much of that sort of thing about just now. They talk of poodles being kidnapped, but as for duchesses- You'd really better let me call that cab."

"Ivor, do you want me to kick you? Don't you see that to me it's a question of life and death? I've been in there to get the money." His Grace motioned towards the bank. "I'm going to take it to the scoundrel who has my darling at his mercy. Let me but have her hand in mine again, and he shall continue to pay for every sovereign with tears of blood until he dies."

"Look here, Datchet, I don't know if you're having a joke with me, or if you're not well-"

The Duke stepped impatiently into the roadway.

"Ivor, you're a fool! Can't you tell jest from earnest, health from disease? I'm off! Are you coming with me? It would be as well that I should have a witness."

"Where are you off to?"

"To the other end of the Arcade."

"Who is the gentleman you expect to have the pleasure of meeting there?"

"How should I know?" The Duke took a letter from his pocket-it was the letter which had just arrived. "The fellow is to wear a white top-hat, and a gardenia in his button hole."

"What is it you have there?"

"It's the letter which brought the news-look for yourself and see; but, for God's sake make haste!" His Grace glanced at his watch. "It's already twenty after five."

"And do you mean to say that on the strength of a letter such as this you are going to hand over five hundred pounds to-"

The Duke cut Mr. Dacre short:

"What are five hundred pounds to me? Besides, you don't know all. There is another letter. And I have heard from Mabel. But I will tell you all about it later. If you are coming, come!"

Folding up the letter, Mr. Dacre returned it to the Duke.

"As you say, what are five hundred pounds to you? It's as well they are not as much to you as they are to me, or I'm afraid-"

"Hang it, Ivor, do prose afterwards!"

The Duke hurried across the road. Mr. Dacre hastened after him. As they entered the Arcade they passed a constable. Mr. Dacre touched his companion's arm.

"Don't you think we'd better ask our friend in blue to walk behind us? His neighbourhood might be handy."

"Nonsense!" The Duke stopped short. "Ivor, this is my affair, not yours. If you are not content to play the part of silent witness, be so good as to leave me."

"My dear Datchet, I'm entirely at your service. I can be every whit as insane as you, I do assure you."

Side by side they moved rapidly down the Burlington Arcade. The Duke was obviously in a state of the extremest nervous tension. Mr. Dacre was equally obviously in a state of the most supreme enjoyment. People stared as they rushed past. The Duke saw nothing. Mr. Dacre saw everything, and smiled.

When they reached the Piccadilly end of the Arcade the Duke pulled up. He looked about him. Mr. Dacre also looked about him.

"I see nothing of your white-hatted and gardenia-button-holed friend," said Ivor.

The Duke referred to his watch:

"It's not yet half-past five. I'm up to time."

Mr. Dacre held his stick in front of him and leaned on it. He indulged himself with a beatific smile:

"It strikes me, my dear Datchet, that you've been the victim of one of the finest things in hoaxes-"

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

The voice which interrupted Mr. Dacre came from the rear. While they were looking in front of them some one approached from behind, apparently coming out of the shop which was at their backs.

The speaker looked a gentleman. He sounded like one, too. Costume, appearance, manner were beyond reproach-even beyond the criticism of two such keen critics as were these. The glorious attire of a London dandy was surmounted with a beautiful white top-hat. In his button-hole was a magnificent gardenia.

In age the stranger was scarcely more than a boy, and a sunny-faced, handsome boy at that. His cheeks were hairless, his eyes were blue. His smile was not only innocent, it was bland. Never was there a more conspicuous illustration of that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

The Duke looked at him, and glowered. Mr. Dacre looked at him, and smiled.

"Who are you?" asked the Duke.

"Ah-that is the question!" The newcomer's refined and musical voice breathed the very soul of affability. "I am an individual who is so unfortunate as to be in want of five hundred pounds."

"Are you the scoundrel who sent me that infamous letter?"

That charming stranger never turned a hair!

"I am the scoundrel mentioned in that infamous letter who wants to accost you at the Piccadilly end of the Burlington Arcade before half-past five-as witness my white hat and my gardenia."

"Where's my wife?"

The stranger gently swung his stick in front of him with his two hands. He regarded the Duke as a merry-hearted son might regard his father. The thing was beautiful!

"Her Grace will be home almost as soon as you are-when you have given me the money which I perceive you have all ready for me in that scarcely elegant-looking canvas bag." He shrugged his shoulders quite gracefully. "Unfortunately, in these matters one has no choice-one is forced to ask for gold."

"And suppose, instead of giving you what is in this canvas bag, I take you by the throat and choke the life right out of you?"

"Or suppose," amended Mr. Dacre, "that you do better, and commend this gentleman to the tender mercies of the first policeman we encounter."

The stranger turned to Mr. Dacre. He condescended to become conscious of his presence.

"Is this gentleman your Grace's friend? Ah-Mr. Dacre, I perceive! I have the honour of knowing Mr. Dacre, although, possibly, I am unknown to him."

"You were-until this moment."

With an airy little laugh the stranger returned to the Duke. He brushed an invisible speck of dust off the sleeve of his coat.

"As has been intimated in that infamous letter, his Grace is at perfect liberty to give me into custody-why not? Only" – he said it with his boyish smile-"if a particular communication is not received from me in certain quarters within a certain time, the Duchess of Datchet's beautiful white arm will be hacked off at the shoulder."

"You hound!"

The Duke would have taken the stranger by the throat, and have done his best to choke the life right out of him then and there, if Mr. Dacre had not intervened.

"Steady, old man!" Mr. Dacre turned to the stranger: "You appear to be a pretty sort of a scoundrel."

The stranger gave his shoulders that almost imperceptible shrug:

"Oh, my dear Dacre, I am in want of money! I believe that you sometimes are in want of money, too."

Everybody knows that nobody knows where Ivor Dacre gets his money from, so the illusion must have tickled him immensely.

"You're a cool hand," he said.

"Some men are born that way."

"So I should imagine. Men like you must be born, not made."

"Precisely-as you say!" The stranger turned, with his graceful smile, to the Duke: "But are we not wasting precious time? I can assure your Grace that, in this particular matter, moments are of value."

Mr. Dacre interposed before the Duke could answer:

"If you take my strongly urged advice, Datchet, you will summon this constable who is now coming down the Arcade, and hand over this gentleman to his keeping. I do not think that you need fear that the Duchess will lose her arm, or even her little finger. Scoundrels of this one's kidney are most amenable to reason when they have handcuffs on their wrists."

The Duke plainly hesitated. He would-and he would not. The stranger, as he eyed him, seemed much amused.

"My dear Duke, by all means act on Mr. Dacre's valuable suggestion. As I said before, why not? It would at least be interesting to see if the Duchess does or does not lose her arm-almost as interesting to you as to Mr. Dacre. Those blackmailing, kidnapping scoundrels do use such empty menaces. Besides, you would have the pleasure of seeing me locked up. My imprisonment for life would recompense you even for the loss of her Grace's arm. And five hundred pounds is such a sum to have to pay-merely for a wife! Why not, therefore, act on Mr. Dacre's suggestion? Here comes the constable." The constable referred to was advancing towards them-he was not a dozen yards away. "Let me beckon to him-I will with pleasure." He took out his watch-a gold chronograph repeater. "There are scarcely ten minutes left during which it will be possible for me to send the communication which I spoke of, so that it may arrive in time. As it will then be too late, and the instruments are already prepared for the little operation which her Grace is eagerly anticipating, it would, perhaps, be as well, after all, that you should give me into charge. You would have saved your five hundred pounds, and you would, at any rate, have something in exchange for her Grace's mutilated limb. Ah, here is the constable! Officer!"

The stranger spoke with such a pleasant little air of easy geniality that it was impossible to tell if he were in jest or earnest. This fact impressed the Duke much more than if he had gone in for a liberal indulgence of the-under the circumstances-orthodox melodramatic scowling. And, indeed, in the face of his own common sense, it impressed Mr. Ivor Dacre too.

This well-bred, well-groomed youth was just the being to realise-*aux bouts des ongles*-a modern type of the devil, the type which depicts him as a perfect gentleman, who keeps smiling all the time.

The constable whom this audacious rogue had signalled approached the little group. He addressed the stranger:

"Do you want me, sir?"

"No, I do not want you. I think it is the Duke of Datchet."

The constable, who knew the Duke very well by sight, saluted him as he turned to receive instructions.

The Duke looked white, even savage. There was not a pleasant look in his eyes and about his lips. He appeared to be endeavouring to put a great restraint upon himself. There was a momentary silence. Mr. Dacre made a movement as if to interpose. The Duke caught him by the arm.

He spoke: "No, constable, I do not want you. This person is mistaken."

The constable looked as if he could not quite make out how such a mistake could have arisen, hesitated, then, with another salute, he moved away.

The stranger was still holding his watch in his hand.

"Only eight minutes," he said.

The Duke seemed to experience some difficulty in giving utterance to what he had to say.

"If I give you this five hundred pounds, you-you-"

As the Duke paused, as if at a loss for language which was strong enough to convey his meaning, the stranger laughed.

"Let us take the adjectives for granted. Besides, it is only boys who call each other names-men do things. If you give me the five hundred sovereigns, which you have in that bag, at once-in five minutes it will be too late-I will promise-I will not swear; if you do not credit my simple promise, you will not believe my solemn affirmation-I will promise that, possibly within an hour, certainly within an hour and a half, the Duchess of Datchet shall return to you absolutely uninjured-except, of course, as you are already aware, with regard to a few of the hairs of her head. I will promise this on the understanding that you do not yourself attempt to see where I go, and that you will allow no one else to do so." This with a glance at Ivor Dacre. "I shall know at once if I am followed. If you entertain any such intentions, you had better, on all accounts, remain in possession of your five hundred pounds."

The Duke eyed him very grimly:

"I entertain no such intentions-until the Duchess returns."

Again the stranger indulged in that musical little laugh of his:

"Ah, until the Duchess returns! Of course, then the bargain's at an end. When you are once more in the enjoyment of her Grace's society, you will be at liberty to set all the dogs in Europe at my heels. I assure you I fully expect that you will do so-why not?" The Duke raised the canvas bag. "My dear Duke, ten thousand thanks! You shall see her Grace at Datchet House, 'pon my honour. Probably within the hour."

"Well," commented Ivor Dacre, when the stranger had vanished, with the bag, into Piccadilly, and as the Duke and himself moved towards Burlington Gardens, "if a gentleman is to be robbed, it is as well that he should have another gentleman to rob him."

CHAPTER III AND FOUND

Mr. Dacre eyed his companion covertly as they progressed. His Grace of Datchet appeared to have some fresh cause for uneasiness. All at once he gave it utterance, in a tone of voice which was extremely sombre:

"Ivor, do you think that scoundrel will dare to play me false?"

"I think," murmured Mr. Dacre, "that he has dared to play you pretty false already."

"I don't mean that. But I mean how am I to know, now that he has his money, that he will still not keep Mabel in his clutches?"

There came an echo from Mr. Dacre:

"Just so-how are you to know?"

"I believe that something of this sort has been done in the United States."

"I thought that there they were content to kidnap them after they were dead. I was not aware that they had, as yet, got quite so far as the living."

"I believe that I have heard of something just like this."

"Possibly; they are giants over there."

"And in that case the scoundrels, when their demands were met, refused to keep to the letter of their bargain, and asked for more."

The Duke stood still. He clenched his fists, and swore:

"Ivor, if that – villain doesn't keep his word, and Mabel isn't home within the hour, by – I shall go mad!"

"My dear Datchet" – Mr. Dacre loved strong language as little as he loved a scene-"let us trust to time and, a little, to your white-hatted and gardenia-button-holed friend's word of honour. You should have thought of possible eventualities before you showed your confidence-really. Suppose, instead of going mad, we first of all go home?"

A hansom stood waiting for a fare at the end of the Arcade. Mr. Dacre had handed the Duke into it before his Grace had quite realised that the vehicle was there.

"Tell the fellow to drive faster." That was what the Duke said when the cab had started.

"My dear Datchet, the man's already driving his geegee off its legs. If a bobby catches sight of him he'll take his number."

A moment later, a murmur from the Duke:

"I don't know if you're aware that the Prince is coming to dinner?"

"I am perfectly aware of it."

"You take it uncommonly coolly. How easy it is to bear our brother's burdens! Ivor, if Mabel doesn't turn up I shall feel like murder."

"I sympathise with you, Datchet, with all my heart, though, I may observe, parenthetically, that I very far from realise the situation even yet. Take my advice. If the Duchess does not show quite so soon as we both of us desire, don't make a scene; just let me see what I can do."

Judging from the expression of his countenance, the Duke was conscious of no overwhelming desire to witness an exhibition of Mr. Dacre's prowess.

When the cab reached Datchet House his Grace dashed up the steps three at a time. The door flew open.

"Has the Duchess returned?"

"Hereward!"

A voice floated downwards from above. Some one came running down the stairs. It was her Grace of Datchet.

"Mabel!"

She actually rushed into the Duke's extended arms. And he kissed her, and she kissed him-before the servants.

"So you're not quite dead?" she cried.

"I am almost," he said.

She drew herself a little away from him.

"Hereward, were you seriously hurt?"

"Do you suppose that I could have been otherwise than seriously hurt?"

"My darling! Was it a Pickford's van?"

The Duke stared:

"A Pickford's van? I don't understand. But come in here. Come along, Ivor. Mabel, you don't see Ivor."

"How do you do, Mr. Dacre?"

Then the trio withdrew into a little ante-room; it was really time. Even then the pair conducted themselves as if Mr. Dacre had been nothing and no one. The Duke took the lady's two hands in his. He eyed her fondly.

"So you are uninjured, with the exception of that lock of hair. Where did the villain take it from?"

The lady looked a little puzzled:

"What lock of hair?"

From an envelope which he took from his pocket the Duke produced a shining tress. It was the lock of hair which had arrived in the first communication. "I will have it framed."

"You will have what framed?" The Duchess glanced at what the Duke was so tenderly caressing, almost, as it seemed, a little dubiously, "Whatever is it you have there?"

"It is the lock of hair which that scoundrel sent me." Something in the lady's face caused him to ask a question: "Didn't he tell you he had sent it me?"

"Hereward!"

"Did the brute tell you that he meant to cut off your little finger?"

A very curious look came into the lady's face. She glanced at the Duke as if she, all at once, were half afraid of him. She cast at Mr. Dacre what really seemed to be a look of enquiry. Her voice was tremulously anxious:

"Hereward, did-did the accident affect you mentally?"

"How could it not have affected me mentally? Do you think that my mental organization is of steel?"

"But you look so well?"

"Of course I look well, now that I have you back again. Tell me, darling, did that hound actually threaten you with cutting off your arm? If he did, I shall feel half inclined to kill him yet."

The Duchess seemed positively to shrink from her better-half's near neighbourhood:

"Hereward, was it a Pickford's van?"

The Duke seemed puzzled. Well he might be:

"Was what a Pickford's van?"

The lady turned to Mr. Dacre. In her voice there was a ring of anguish:

"Mr. Dacre, tell me, was it a Pickford's van?"

Ivor could only imitate his relative's repetition of her inquiry:

"I don't quite catch you-was what a Pickford's van?"

The Duchess clasped her hands in front of her: "What is it you are keeping from me? What is it you are trying to hide? I implore you to tell me the worst, whatever it may be! Do not keep me any longer in suspense; you do not know what I already have endured. Mr. Dacre, is my husband mad?"

One need scarcely observe that the lady's amazing appeal to Mr. Dacre as to her husband's sanity was received with something like surprise. As the Duke continued to stare at her, a dreadful fear began to loom upon his brain:

"My darling, your brain is unhinged!"

He advanced to take her two hands again in his; but, to his unmistakable distress, she shrank away from him:

"Hereward-don't touch me. How is it that I missed you? Why did you not wait until I came?"

"Wait until you came?"

The Duke's bewilderment increased.

"Surely, if your injuries turned out, after all, to be slight, that was all the more reason why you should have waited, after sending for me like that."

"I sent for you-I?" The Duke's tone was grave. "My darling, perhaps you had better come upstairs."

"Not until we have had an explanation. You must have known that I should come. Why did you not wait for me after you had sent me that?"

The Duchess held out something to the Duke. He took it. It was a card-his own visiting-card. Something was written on the back of it. He read aloud what was written:

"Mabel, come to me at once with bearer. They tell me that they cannot take me home.' It looks like my own writing."

"Looks like it! It is your writing."

"It looks like it-and written with a shaky pen."

"My dear child, one's hand would shake at such a moment as that."

"Mabel, where did you get this?"

"It was brought to me in Cane and Wilson's."

"Who brought it?"

"Who brought it? Why, the man you sent."

"The man I sent?" A light burst upon the Duke's brain. He fell back a pace. "It's the decoy!"

Her Grace echoed the words:

"The decoy?"

"The scoundrel! To set a trap with such a bait! My poor, innocent darling, did you think it came from me? Tell me, Mabel, where did he cut off your hair?"

"Cut off my hair?"

Her Grace put her hand up to her head as if to make sure that her hair was there.

"Where did he take you to?"

"He took me to Draper's Buildings."

"Draper's Buildings?"

"I have never been in the City before, but he told me it was Draper's Buildings. Isn't that near the Stock Exchange?"

"Near the Stock Exchange?"

It seemed rather a curious place to which to take a kidnapped victim. The man's audacity!

"He told me that you were coming out of the Stock Exchange when a van knocked you over. He said that he thought it was a Pickford's van-was it a Pickford's van?"

"No, it was not a Pickford's van. Mabel, were you in Draper's Buildings when you wrote that letter?"

"Wrote what letter?"

"Have you forgotten it already? I do not believe that there is a word in it which will not be branded on my brain until I die."

"Hereward! What do you mean?"

"Surely you cannot have written me such a letter as that, and then have forgotten it already?"

He handed her the letter which had arrived in the second communication. She glanced at it, askance. Then she took it with a little gasp.

"Hereward, if you don't mind, I think I'll take a chair." She took a chair. "Whatever-whatever's this?" As she read the letter the varying expressions which passed across her face were, in themselves, a study in psychology. "Is it possible that you can imagine that, under any conceivable circumstances, I could have written such a letter as this?"

"Mabel!"

She rose to her feet, with emphasis:

"Hereward, don't say that you thought this came from me!"

"Not come from you?" He remembered Knowles's diplomatic reception of the epistle on its first appearance. "I suppose that you will say next that this is not a lock of your hair?"

"My dear child, what bee have you got in your bonnet? This a lock of my hair! Why, it's not in the least like my hair!"

Which was certainly inaccurate. As far as color was concerned it was an almost perfect match. The Duke turned to Mr. Dacre.

"Ivor, I've had to go through a good deal this afternoon. If I have to go through much more, something will crack!" He touched his forehead. "I think it's my turn to take a chair." He also took a chair. Not the one which the Duchess had vacated, but one which faced it. He stretched out his legs in front of him; he thrust his hands into his trousers-pockets; he said, in a tone which was not only gloomy but absolutely gruesome:

"Might I ask, Mabel, if you have been kidnapped?"

"Kidnapped?"

"The word I used was 'kidnapped.' But I will spell it if you like. Or I will get a dictionary, that you may see its meaning."

The Duchess looked as if she was beginning to be not quite sure if she was awake or sleeping. She turned to Ivor:

"Mr. Dacre, has the accident affected Hereward's brain?"

The Duke took the words out of his cousin's mouth:

"On that point, my dear, let me ease your mind. I don't know if you are under the impression that I should be the same shape after a Pickford's van had run over me as I was before; but, in any case, I have not been run over by a Pickford's van. So far as I am concerned there has been no accident. Dismiss that delusion from your mind."

"Oh!"

"You appear surprised. One might even think that you were sorry. But may I now ask what you did when you arrived at Draper's Buildings?"

"Did! I looked for you!"

"Indeed! And when you had looked in vain, what was the next item in your programme?"

The lady shrank still further from him:

"Hereward, have you been having a jest at my expense? Can you have been so cruel?" Tears stood in her eyes.

Rising, the Duke laid his hand upon her arm:

"Mabel, tell me-what did you do when you had looked for me in vain?"

"I looked for you upstairs and downstairs, and everywhere. It was quite a large place, it took me ever such a time. I thought that I should go distracted. Nobody seemed to know anything about you, or even that there had been an accident at all-it was all offices. I couldn't make it out in the least, and the people didn't seem to be able to make me out either. So when I couldn't find you anywhere I came straight home again."

The Duke was silent for a moment. Then, with funereal gravity, he turned to Mr. Dacre. He put to him this question:

"Ivor, what are you laughing at?"

Mr. Dacre drew his hand across his mouth with rather a suspicious gesture:

"My dear fellow, only a smile!"

The Duchess looked from one to the other:

"What have you two been doing? What is the joke?"

With an air of preternatural solemnity the Duke took two letters from the breast-pocket of his coat.

"Mabel, you have already seen your letter. You have already seen the lock of your hair. Just look at this-and that."

He gave her the two very singular communications which had arrived in such a mysterious manner, and so quickly one after the other. She read them with wide-open eyes.

"Hereward! Wherever did these come from?"

The Duke was standing with his legs apart, and his hands in his trousers-pockets. "I would give-I would give another five hundred pounds to know. Shall I tell you, madam, what I have been doing? I have been presenting five hundred golden sovereigns to a perfect stranger, with a top-hat, and a gardenia in his button-hole."

"Whatever for?"

"If you have perused those documents which you have in your hand, you will have some faint idea. Ivor, when its your funeral *I'll* smile. Mabel, Duchess of Datchet, it is beginning to dawn upon the vacuum which represents my brain that I've been the victim of one of the prettiest things in practical jokes that ever yet was planned. When that fellow brought you that card at Cane and Wilson's-which, I need scarcely tell you, never came from me-some one walked out of the front entrance who was so exactly like you that both Barnes and Moysey took her for you. Moysey showed her into the carriage, and Barnes drove her home. But when the carriage reached home it was empty. Your double had got out upon the road."

The Duchess uttered a sound which was half a gasp, half sigh:

"Hereward!"

"Barnes and Moysey, with beautiful and childlike innocence, when they found that they had brought the thing home empty, came straightway and told me that you had jumped out of the brougham while it had been driving full pelt through the streets. While I was digesting that piece of information there came the first epistle, with the lock of your hair. Before I had time to digest that there came the second epistle, with yours inside, and, as a guarantee of the authenticity of your appeal, the same envelope held this."

The Duke handed the Duchess the half of the broken sixpence. She stared at it with the most unequivocal astonishment.

"Why, it looks just like my sixpence." She put her hand to her breast, feeling something that was there. "But it isn't! What wickedness!"

"It is wickedness, isn't it? Anyhow, that seemed good enough for me; so I posted off the five hundred pounds to save your arm-not to dwell upon your little finger."

"It seems incredible!"

"Its sounds incredible; but unfathomable is the folly of man, especially of a man who loves his wife." The Duke crossed to Mr. Dacre. "I don't want, Ivor, to suggest anything in the way of bribery and corruption, but if you could keep this matter to yourself, and not mention it to your friends, our white-hatted and gardenia-button-holed acquaintance is welcome to his five hundred pounds, and-Mabel, what on earth are you laughing at?"

The Duchess appeared, all at once, to be seized with inextinguishable laughter.

"Hereward," she cried, "just think how that man must be laughing at you!"

And the Duke of Datchet thought of it.

THE STRANGE OCCURRENCES INCANTERSTONE JAIL

CHAPTER I MR. MANKELL DECLARES HIS INTENTION OF ACTING ON MAGISTERIAL ADVICE

Oliver Mankell was sentenced to three months' hard labour. The charge was that he had obtained money by means of false pretences. Not large sums, but shillings, half-crowns, and so on. He had given out that he was a wizard, and that he was able and willing-for a consideration-to predict the events of the future-tell fortunes, in fact. The case created a large amount of local interest, for some curious stories were told about the man in the town. Mankell was a tall, slight, wiry-looking fellow in the prime of life, with coal-black hair and olive complexion-apparently of Romany extraction. His bearing was self-possessed, courteous even, yet with something in his air which might have led one to suppose that he saw-what others did not-the humour of the thing. At one point his grave, almost saturnine visage distinctly relaxed into a smile. It was when Colonel Gregory, the chairman of the day, was passing sentence. After committing him for three months' hard labour, the Colonel added-

"During your sojourn within the walls of a prison you will have an opportunity of retrieving your reputation. You say you are a magician. During your stay in jail I would strongly advise you to prove it. You lay claim to magic powers. Exercise them. I need scarcely point out to you how excellent a chance you will have of creating a sensation."

The people laughed. When the great Panjandrum is even dimly suspected of an intention to be funny, the people always do. But on this occasion even the prisoner smiled-rather an exceptional thing, for as a rule it is the prisoner who sees the joke the least of all.

Later in the day the prisoner was conveyed to the county jail. This necessitated a journey by rail, with a change upon the way. At the station where they changed there was a delay of twenty minutes. This the prisoner and the constable in charge of him improved by adjourning to a public house hard by. Here they had a glass-indeed they had two-and when they reached Canterstone, the town on whose outskirts stood the jail, they had one-or perhaps it was two-more. It must have been two, for when they reached the jail, instead of the constable conveying the prisoner, it was the prisoner who conveyed the constable-upon his shoulder. The warder who answered the knock seemed surprised at what he saw.

"What do you want?"

"Three months' hard labour."

The warder stared. The shades of night had fallen, and the lamp above the prison-door did not seem to cast sufficient light upon the subject to satisfy the janitor.

"Come inside," he said.

Mankell entered, the constable upon his shoulder. Having entered, he carefully placed the constable in a sitting posture on the stones, with his back against the wall. The policeman's helmet had tipped over his eyes-he scarcely presented an imposing picture of the majesty and might of the law. The warder shook him by the shoulder. "Here, come-wake up. You're a pretty sort," he said. The constable's reply, although slightly inarticulate, was yet sufficiently distinct.

"Not another drop!" he murmured.

"No, I shouldn't think so," said the warder. "You've had a pailful, it seems to me, already."

The man seemed a little puzzled. He turned and looked at Mankell.

"What do you want here?"

"Three months' hard labour."

The man looked down and saw that the new-comer had gyves upon his wrists. He went to a door at one side, and summoned another warder. The two returned together. This second official took in the situation at a glance.

"Have you come from-?" naming the town from which they in fact had come. Mankell inclined his head. This second official turned his attention to the prostrate constable. "Look in his pockets."

The janitor acted on the suggestion. The order for committal was produced.

"Are you Oliver Mankell?"

Again Mankell inclined his head. With the order in his hand, the official marched him through the side-door by which he had himself appeared. Soon Oliver Mankell was the inmate of a cell. He spent that night in the reception-cells at the gate. In the morning he had a bath, was inducted into prison clothing, and examined by the doctor. He was then taken up to the main building of the prison, and introduced to the governor. The governor was a quiet, gentlemanly man, with a straggling black beard and spectacles-the official to the tips of his fingers. As Mankell happened to be the only fresh arrival, the governor favoured him with a little speech.

"You've placed yourself in an uncomfortable position, Mankell. I hope you'll obey the rules while you're here."

"I intend to act upon the advice tendered me by the magistrate who passed sentence."

The governor looked up. Not only was the voice a musical voice, but the words were not the sort of words generally chosen by the average prisoner.

"What advice was that?"

"He said that I claimed to be a magician. He strongly advised me to prove it during my stay in jail. I intend to act upon the advice he tendered."

The governor looked Mankell steadily in the face. The speaker's bearing conveyed no suggestion of insolent intention. The governor looked down again.

"I advise you to be careful what you do. You may make your position more uncomfortable than it is already. Take the man away."

They took the man away. They introduced him to the wheel. On the treadmill he passed the remainder of the morning. At noon morning tasks were over, and the prisoners were marched into their day-cells to enjoy the meal which, in prison parlance, was called dinner. In accordance with the ordinary routine, the chaplain made his appearance in the round-house to interview those prisoners who had just come in, and those whose sentences would be completed on the morrow. When Mankell had been asked at the gate what his religion was, he had made no answer; so the warder, quite used to ignorance on the part of new arrivals as to all religions, had entered him as a member of the Church of England. As a member of the Church of England he was taken out to interview the chaplain.

The chaplain was a little fussy gentleman, considerably past middle age. Long experience of prisons and prisoners had bred in him a perhaps unconscious habit of regarding criminals as naughty boys-urchins who required a judicious combination of cakes and castigation.

"Well, my lad, I'm sorry to see a man of your appearance here." This was a remark the chaplain made to a good many of his new friends. It was intended to give them the impression that at least the chaplain perceived that they were something out of the ordinary run. Then he dropped his voice to a judicious whisper. "What's it for?"

"For telling the truth."

This reply seemed a little to surprise the chaplain. He settled his spectacles upon his nose.

"For telling the truth!" An idea seemed all at once to strike the chaplain. "Do you mean that you pleaded guilty?" The man was silent. The chaplain referred to a paper he held in his hand. "Eh, I see that here it is written 'false pretences.' Was it a stumer?"

We have seen it mentioned somewhere that "stumer" is slang for a worthless cheque. It was a way with the chaplain to let his charges see that he was at least acquainted with their phraseology. But on this occasion there was no response. The officer in charge of Mankell, who possibly wanted his dinner, put in his oar.

"Telling fortunes, sir."

"Telling fortunes! Oh! Dear me! How sad! You see what telling fortunes brings you to? There will be no difficulty in telling your fortune if you don't take care. I will see you to-morrow morning after chapel."

The chaplain turned away. But his prediction proved to be as false as Mankell's were stated to have been. He did not see him the next morning after chapel, and that for the sufficient reason that on the following morning there was no chapel. And the reasons why there was no chapel were very curious indeed-unprecedented, in fact.

Canterstone Jail was an old-fashioned prison. In it each prisoner had two cells, one for the day and one for the night. The day-cells were on the ground-floor, those for the night were overhead. At six a.m. a bell was rung, and the warders unlocked the night-cells for the occupants to go down to those beneath. That was the rule. That particular morning was an exception to the rule. The bell was rung as usual, and the warders started to unlock, but there the adherence to custom ceased, for the doors of the cells refused to be unlocked.

The night-cells were hermetically sealed by oaken doors of massive thickness, bolted and barred in accordance with the former idea that the security of prisoners should depend rather upon bolts and bars than upon the vigilance of the officers in charge. Each door was let into a twenty-four inch brick-wall, and secured by two ponderous bolts and an enormous lock of the most complicated workmanship. These locks were kept constantly oiled. When the gigantic key was inserted, it turned as easily as the key of a watch-that was the rule. When, therefore, on inserting his key into the lock of the first cell, Warder Slater found that it wouldn't turn at all, he was rather taken aback. "Who's been having a game with this lock?" he asked.

Warder Puffin, who was stationed at the head of the stairs to see that the prisoners passed down in order, at the proper distance from each other, replied to him.

"Anything the matter with the lock? Try the next."

Warder Slater did try the next, but he found that as refractory as the first had been.

"Perhaps you've got the wrong key?" suggested Warder Puffin.

"Got the wrong key!" cried Warder Slater. "Do you think I don't know my own keys when I see them?"

The oddest part of it was that all the locks were the same. Not only in Ward A, but in Wards B, C, D, E, and F-in all the wards, in fact. When this became known, a certain sensation was created, and that on both sides of the unlocked doors. The prisoners were soon conscious that their guardians were unable to release them, and they made a noise. Nothing is so precious to the average prisoner as a grievance; here was a grievance with a vengeance.

The chief warder was a man named Murray. He was short and stout, with a red face, and short, stubbly white hair-his very appearance suggested apoplexy. That suggestion was emphasised when he lost his temper-capable officer though he was, that was more than once in a while. He was in the wheel-shed, awaiting the arrival of the prisoners preparatory to being told off to their various tasks, when, instead of the prisoners, Warder Slater appeared. If Murray was stout, Slater was stouter. He was about five feet eight, and weighed at least 250 pounds. He was wont to amaze those who saw him for the first time-and wondered-by assuring them that he had a brother who

was still stouter-compared to whom he was a skeleton, in fact. But he was stout enough. He and the chief warder made a striking pair.

"There's something the matter with the locks of the night-cells, sir. We can't undo the doors."

"Can't undo the doors!" Mr. Murray turned the colour of a boiled beetroot. "What do you mean?"

"It's very queer, sir, but all over the place it's the same. We can't get none of the doors unlocked."

Mr. Murray started off at a good round pace, Slater following hard at his heels. The chief warder tried his hand himself. He tried every lock in the prison; not one of them vouchsafed to budge. Not one, that is, with a single exception. The exception was in Ward B, No. 27. Mr. Murray had tried all the other doors in the ward, beginning with No. 1-tried them all in vain. But when he came to No. 27, the lock turned with the customary ease, and the door was open. Within it was Oliver Mankell, standing decorously at attention, waiting to be let out. Mr. Murray stared at him.

"Hum! there's nothing the matter with this lock, at any rate. You'd better go down."

Oliver Mankell went downstairs-he was the only man in Canterstone jail who did.

"Well, this is a pretty go!" exclaimed Mr. Murray, when he had completed his round. Two or three other warders had accompanied him. He turned on these. "Someone will smart for this-you see if they don't. Keep those men still."

The din was deafening. The prisoners, secure of a grievance, were practising step-dances in their heavy shoes on the stone floors: they made the narrow vaulted corridors ring.

"Silence those men!" shouted Mr. Jarvis, the second warder, who was tall and thin as the chief was short and stout. He might as well have shouted to the wind. Those in the cells just close at hand observed the better part of valour, but those a little distance off paid not the slightest heed. If they were locked in, the officers were locked out.

"I must go and see the governor." Mr. Murray pursed up his lips. "Keep those men still, or I'll know the reason why."

He strode off, leaving his subordinates to obey his orders-if they could, or if they couldn't.

Mr. Paley's house was in the centre of the jail. Paley, by the way, was the governor's name. The governor, when Mr. Murray arrived, was still in bed. He came down to the chief warder in rather primitive disarray.

"Anything the matter, Murray?"

"Yes, sir; there's something very much the matter, indeed."

"What is it?"

"We can't get any of the doors of the night-cells open."

"You can't get-what?"

"There seems to be something the matter with the locks."

"The locks? All of them? Absurd!"

"Well, there they are, and there's the men inside of them, and we can't get 'em out-at least I've tried my hand, and I know I can't."

"I'll come with you at once, and see what you mean."

Mr. Paley was as good as his word. He started off just as he was. As they were going, the chief warder made another remark.

"By the way, there is one cell we managed to get open-I opened it myself."

"I thought you said there was none?"

"There's that one-it's that man Mankell."

"Mankell? Who is he?"

"He came in yesterday. It's that magician."

When they reached the cells, it was easy to perceive that something was wrong. The warders hung about in twos and threes; the noise was deafening; the prisoners were keeping holiday.

"Get me the keys and let me see what I can do. It is impossible that all the locks can have been tampered with."

They presented Mr. Paley with the keys. In his turn he tried every lock in the jail. This was not a work of a minute or two. The prison contained some three hundred night-cells. To visit them all necessitated not only a good deal of running up and down stairs, but a good deal of actual walking; for they were not only in different floors and in different blocks, but the prison itself was divided into two entirely separate divisions-north and south-and to pass from one division to the other entailed a walk of at least a hundred yards. By the time he had completed the round of the locks, Mr. Paley had had about enough of it. It was not surprising that he felt a little bewildered-not one of the locks had shown any more readiness to yield to him than to the others.

In passing from one ward to the other, he had passed the row of day-cells in which was situated B 27. Here they found Oliver Mankell sitting in silent state awaiting the call to work. The governor pulled up at the sight of him.

"Well, Mankell, so there was nothing the matter with the lock of your door?"

Mankell simply inclined his head.

"I suppose you know nothing about the locks of the other doors?"

Again the inclination of the head. The man seemed to be habitually chary of speech.

"What's the matter with you? Are you dumb? Can't you speak when you're spoken to?"

This time Mankell extended the palms of his hands with a gesture which might mean anything or nothing. The governor passed on. The round finished, he held a consultation with the chief warder.

"Have you any suspicions?"

"It's queer." Mr. Murray stroked his bristly chin.

"It's very queer that that man Mankell's should be the only cell in the prison left untampered with."

"Very queer, indeed."

"What are we to do? We can't leave the men locked up all day. It's breakfast-time already. I suppose the cooks haven't gone down to the cookhouse?"

"They're locked up with the rest. Barnes has been up to know what he's to do."

Barnes was the prison cook. The cooks referred to were six good-behaviour men who were told off to assist him in his duties.

"If the food were cooked, I don't see how we should give it to the men."

"That's the question." Mr. Murray pondered.

"We might pass it through the gas-holes."

"We should have to break the glass to do it. You wouldn't find it easy. It's plate-glass, an inch in thickness, and built into the solid wall."

There was a pause for consideration.

"Well, this is a pretty start. I've never come across anything like it in all my days before."

Mr. Paley passed his hand through his hair. He had never come across anything like it either.

"I shall have to telegraph to the commissioners. I can't do anything without their sanction."

The following telegram was sent:

"Cannot get prisoners out of night-cells. Something the matter with locks. Cannot give them any food. The matter is very urgent. What shall I do?"

The following answer was received:

"Inspector coming down."

The inspector came down-Major William Hardinge. A tall, portly gentleman, with a very decided manner. When he saw the governor he came to the point at once.

"What's all this stuff?"

"We can't get the prisoners out of the night-cells."

"Why?"

"There's something the matter with the locks."

"Have you given them any food?"

"We have not been able to."

"When were they locked up?"

"Yesterday evening at six o'clock."

"This is a very extraordinary state of things."

"It is, or I shouldn't have asked for instructions."

"It's now three o'clock in the afternoon. They've been without food for twenty-one hours. You've no right to keep them without food all that time."

"We are helpless. The construction of the night-cells does not permit of our introducing food into the interior when the doors are closed."

"Have they been quiet?"

"They've been as quiet as under the circumstance was to be expected."

As they were crossing towards the north division the governor spoke again:

"We've been able to get one man out."

"One! – out of the lot! How did you get him?"

"Oddly enough, the lock of his cell was the only one in the prison which had not been tampered with."

"Hum! I should like to see that man."

"His name's Mankell. He only came in yesterday. He's been pretending to magic powers-telling fortunes, and that kind of thing."

"Only came in yesterday? He's begun early. Perhaps we shall have to tell him what his fortune's likely to be."

When they reached the wards the keys were handed to the inspector, who in his turn tried his hand. A couple of locksmiths had been fetched up from the town. When the Major had tried two or three of the locks it was enough for him. He turned to the makers of locks.

"What's the matter with these locks?"

"Well, that's exactly what we can't make out. The keys go in all right, but they won't turn. Seems as though somebody had been having a lark with them."

"Can't you pick them?"

"They're not easy locks to pick, but we'll have a try!"

"Have a try!"

They had a try, but they tried in vain. As it happened, the cell on which they commenced operations was occupied by a gentleman who had had a considerable experience in picking locks-experience which had ended in placing him on the other side that door. He derided the locksmiths through the door.

"Well, you are a couple of keen ones! What, can't pick the lock! Why, there ain't a lock in England I couldn't pick with a bent 'airpin. I only wish you was this side, starving like I am, and I was where you are, it wouldn't be a lock that would keep me from giving you food."

This was not the sort of language Major Hardinge was accustomed to hear from the average prisoner, but the Major probably felt that on this occasion the candid proficient in the art of picking locks had a certain excuse. He addressed the baffled workmen.

"If you can't pick the lock, what can you do? The question is, what is the shortest way of getting inside that cell?"

"Get a watch-saw," cried the gentleman on the other side the door.

"And when you've got your watch-saw?" inquired the Major.

"Saw the whole lock right clean away. Lor' bless me! I only wish I was where you are, I'd show you a thing or two. It's as easy as winking. Here's all us chaps a-starving, all for want of a little hexperience!"

"A saw'll be no good," declared one of the locksmiths. "Neither a watch-saw nor any other kind of saw. How are you going to saw through those iron stanchions? You'll have to burst the door in, that's what it'll have to be."

"You won't find it an easy thing to do." This was from the governor.

"Why don't you take and blow the whole place up?" shouted a gentleman, also on the other side of the door, two or three cells off.

Long before this all the occupants of the corridor had been lending a very attentive ear to what was going on. The suggestion was received with roars of laughter. The Major, however, preferred to act upon the workmen's advice. A sledge hammer was sent for.

While they were awaiting its arrival something rather curious happened—curious, that is, viewed in the light of what had gone before. Warder Slater formed one of the party. More for the sake of something to do than anything else, he put his key into the lock of the cell which was just in front of him. Giving it a gentle twist, to his amazement it turned with the greatest ease, and the door was open.

"Here's a go!" he exclaimed. "Blest if this door ain't come open."

There was a yell of jubilation all along the corridor. The prisoners seemed to be amused. The official party kept silence. Possibly their feelings were too deep for words.

"Since we've got this one open," said Warder Slater, "suppose we try another?"

He tried another, the next; the same result followed—the door was opened with the greatest of ease.

"What's the meaning of this?" spluttered the Major. "Who's been playing this tomfoolery? I don't believe there's anything the matter with a lock in the place."

There did not seem to be, just then. For when the officers tried again they found no difficulty in unlocking the doors, and setting the prisoners free.

CHAPTER II

THE CHAPLAIN AS AN AUTHORITY ON WITCHCRAFT

Major Hardinge remained in the jail that night. He stayed in the governor's house as Mr. Paley's guest. He expressed himself very strongly about the events of the day.

"I'll see the thing through if it takes me a week. The whole affair is incredible to me. It strikes me, Paley, that they've been making a fool of you."

The governor combed his hair with his fingers. His official manner had temporarily gone. He seemed depressed.

"I assure you the doors were locked."

"Of course the doors were locked, and they used the wrong keys to open them! It was a got-up thing."

"Not by the officers."

"By whom then? I don't see how the prisoners could have lent a hand."

"I know the officers, and I will answer for them, every man. As for the wrong keys being used, I know the keys as well as any one. I tried them, and not a lock would yield to me."

"But they did yield. What explanation have you to give of that?"

"I wish I could explain." And again the governor combed his hair.

"I'll have an explanation to-morrow! – you see if I don't!" But the Major never did.

On the morrow, punctually at 6 a.m., an imposing procession started to unlock. There were the inspector, governor, chief warder, second warder, and the warder who carried the keys.

"I don't think we shall have much difficulty in getting the men out of their cells this time," remarked the Major. They did not. "Good-good God!" he spluttered, when they reached the corridor; "what-what on earth's the meaning of this?" He had predicted rightly. They would have no difficulty in getting the men out of their cells: they were out already-men, and bedding, and planks, and all. There was a man fast asleep in bed in front of each cell-door.

"I thought I had given instructions that a special watch was to be kept all night," the Major roared.

"So there has been," answered the chief warder, whose head and face and neck were purple. "Warder Slater here has only just gone off duty. Now then, Slater, what's the meaning of this?"

"I don't know," protested Slater, whose mountain of flesh seemed quivering like jelly. "It's not a minute ago since I went to get my keys, and they was all inside their cells when I went down."

"Who let them out, then?"

The Major glared at him, incredulity in every line of his countenance.

"I don't know. I'll swear it wasn't me!"

"I suppose they let themselves out, then. You men!"

Although this short dialogue had been conducted by no means *sotto-voce*, the noise did not seem to have had the slightest effect in rousing the prisoners out of slumber. Even when the Major called to them they gave no sign.

"You men!" he shouted again; "it's no good shamming Abraham with me!" He stooped to shake the man who was lying on the plank at his feet. "Good-good God! The-the-man's not dead?"

"Dead!" cried the governor, kneeling by the Major's side upon the stones.

The sleeper was very still. He was a man of some forty years of age, with nut-brown tangled hair and beard. If not a short-sentence man he was still in the early stages of his term-for he lay on the bare boards of the plank with the rug, blanket, and sheet wrapped closely round him, so that they might take, as far as possible, the place of the coir mattress, which was not there. The bed

was not a bed of comfort, yet his sleep was sound-strangely sound. If he breathed at all, it was so lightly as to be inaudible. On his face was that dazed, strained expression which we sometimes see on the faces of those who, without a moment's warning, have been suddenly visited by death.

"I don't think he's dead," the governor said. "He seems to be in some sort of trance. What's the man's name?"

"Itchcock. He's one of the 'oppickers. He's got a month."

It was Warder Slater who gave the information. The governor took the man by the shoulder, and tried to rouse him out of sleep.

"Hitchcock! Hitchcock! Come, wake up, my man! It's all right; he's coming to-he's waking up."

He did wake up, and that so suddenly as to take the party by surprise. He sprang upright on the plank, nothing on but an attenuated prison shirt, and glared at the officials with looks of unmistakable surprise.

"Holloa! What's up! What's the meaning of this?"

Major Hardinge replied, suspicion peeping from his eyes:

"That is what we want to know, and what we intend to know-what does it mean? Why aren't you in your cell?"

The man seemed for the first time to perceive where he was.

"Strike me lucky, if I ain't outside! Somebody must have took me out when I was asleep." Then, realising in whose presence he was-"I beg your pardon, sir, but someone's took me out."

"The one who took you out took all the others too."

The Major gave a side glance at Warder Slater. That intelligent officer seemed to be suffering agonies. The prisoner glanced along the corridor. "If all the blessed lot of 'em ain't out too!"

They were not only all out, but they were all in the same curiously trance-like sleep. Each man had to be separately roused, and each woke with the same startling, sudden bound. No one seemed more surprised to find themselves where they were than the men themselves. And this was not the case in one ward only but in all the wards in the prison. No wonder the officials felt bewildered by the time they had gone the round.

"There's one thing certain," remarked Warder Slater to Warder Puffin, wiping the perspiration from his-Warder Slater's-brow, "if I let them out in one ward, I couldn't 'ardly let them out in all. Not to mention that I don't see how a man of my build's going to carry eight-and-forty men, bed, bedding, and all, out bodily, and that without disturbing one of them from sleep."

As the official party was returning through B ward, inspecting the men, who were standing at attention in their day-cells, the officer in charge advanced to the governor.

"One man missing, sir! No. 27, sir! Mankell, sir!"

The chief warder started. If possible, he turned a shade more purple even than before.

"Fetch me the key of the night-cells," he said.

It was brought. They went upstairs-the Major, the governor, the chief and second warders. Sure enough they found the missing man, standing at attention in his night-cell, waiting to be let out-the only man in the prison whom they had found in his place. The chief warder unlocked him. In silence they followed him as he went downstairs.

When the Major and Mr. Paley found themselves alone, both of them seemed a little bewildered.

"Well, Major, what do you think of it now?"

"It's a got-up thing! I'll stake my life, it's a got-up thing!"

"What do you mean-a got-up thing?"

"Some of the officers know more about it than they have chosen to say-that man Slater, for instance. But I'll have the thing sifted to the bottom before I go. I never heard of anything more audacious in the whole of my career."

The governor smiled, but he made no comment on the Major's observation. It was arranged that an inquiry should be held after chapel. During chapel a fresh subject was added to the list of those which already called for prompt inquiry.

Probably there is no more delicate and difficult position than that of a prison chaplain. If any man doubt this, let him step into a prison chaplain's shoes and see. He must have two faces, and each face must look in an exactly opposite way. The one towards authority-he is an official, an upholder of the law; the other towards the defiers of authority-he is the criminal's best friend. It requires the wisest of men to do his duty, so as to please both sides; and he must please both sides-or fail. As has already been hinted, Mr. Hewett, the Chaplain of Canterstone Jail, was not the wisest of men. He was in the uncomfortable-but not uncommon-position of being disliked by both the rival houses. He meant well, but he was not an apt interpreter of his own meaning. He blundered, sometimes on the prisoners' toes, and sometimes on the toes of the officials. Before the service began, the governor thought of giving him a hint, not-in the course of it-to touch on the events of the last two days. But previous hints of the same kind had not by any means been well received, and he refrained. Exactly what he feared would happen, happened. Both the inspector and the governor were present at the service. Possibly the chaplain supposed this to be an excellent opportunity of showing the sort of man he was-one full of zeal. At any rate, before the service was over, before pronouncing the benediction, he came down to the altar-rail, in the way they knew so well. The governor, outwardly unruffled, inwardly groaned.

"I have something to say to you."

When he said this, those who knew him knew exactly what was coming; or they thought they did, for, for once in a way, they were grievously wrong. When the chaplain had got so far he paused. It was his habit to indulge in these eloquent pauses, but it was not his habit to behave as he immediately did. While they were waiting for him to go on, almost forecasting the words he would use, a spasm seemed to go all over him, and he clutched the rail and spoke. And what he said was this-

"Bust the screws and blast 'em!"

The words were shouted rather than spoken. In the very act of utterance he clung on to the rail as though he needed its support to enable him to stand. The chapel was intensely still. The men stared at him as though unable to believe their eyes and ears. The chaplain was noted for his little eccentricities, but it was the first time they had taken such a shape as this.

"That's not what I meant to say." The words came out with a gasp. Mr. Hewett put his hand up to his brow. "That's not what I meant to say."

He gave a frightened glance around. Suddenly his gaze became fixed, and he looked intently at some object right in front of him. His eyes assumed a dull and fish-like stare. He hung on to the rail, his surpliced figure trembling as with palsy. Words fell from his lips with feverish volubility.

"What's the good of a screw, I'd like to know? Did you ever know one what was worth his salt? I never did. Look at that beast, Slater, great fat brute, what'd get a man three days' bread-and-water as soon as look at him. A little bread and water'd do him good. Look at old Murray-call a man like that chief warder. I wonder what a chief fat-head's like? As for the governor-as for the governor-as-for-the-governor-"

The chapel was in confusion. The officers rose in their seats. Mr. Paley stood up in his pew, looking whiter than he was wont to do. It seemed as though the chaplain was struggling with an unseen antagonist. He writhed and twisted, contending, as it were, with something-or some one-which appeared to be in front of him. His sentence remained unfinished. All at once he collapsed, and, sinking into a heap, lay upon the steps of the altar-still.

"Take the men out," said the governor's quiet voice.

The men were taken out. The schoolmaster was already at the chaplain's side. With him were two or three of the prisoners who sang in the choir. The governor and the inspector came and looked down at the senseless man.

"Seems to be in a sort of fit," the schoolmaster said.

"Let some one go and see if the doctor has arrived. Ask him to come up here at once." With that the governor left the chapel, the inspector going with him. "It's no good our staying. He'll be all right. I-I don't feel quite well."

Major Hardinge looked at him shrewdly out of the corner of his eyes. "Does he drink?"

"Not that I am aware of. I have never heard of it before. I should say certainly not."

"Is he mad?"

"No-o-he has his peculiarities-but he certainly is not mad."

"Is he subject to fits?"

"I have not known of his having one before."

When they reached the office the Major began to pace about.

"That chaplain of yours must be stark mad."

"If so, it is a very sudden attack."

"Did you hear what he said?"

"Very well indeed."

"Never heard such a thing in my life! Is he in the habit of using such language?"

"Hardly. Perhaps we had better leave it till we hear what the doctor says. Possibly there is some simple explanation. I am afraid the chaplain is unwell."

"If he isn't unwell, I don't know what he is. Upon my word, Paley, I can't congratulate you upon the figure Canterstone Jail has cut during the last few days. I don't know what sort of report I shall have to make."

The governor winced. When, a few minutes afterwards, the doctor entered, he began upon the subject at once.

"How is the chaplain, doctor?"

Dr. Livermore gave a curious glance about him. Then he shook hands with the inspector. Then he sat down. Taking off his hat, he wiped his brow.

"Well? Anything wrong?"

"The chaplain says he is bewitched."

The governor looked at the inspector, and the inspector looked at him.

"Bewitched?" said Mr. Paley.

"I told you the man was mad," the inspector muttered.

"Hush!" the doctor whispered. "Here he comes."

Even as he spoke the chaplain entered, leaning on the chief warder's arm. He advanced to the table at which the governor sat, looking Mr. Paley steadily in the face.

"Mr. Paley, I have to report to you that I have been bewitched."

"I am sorry to hear that, Mr. Hewett." He could not resist a smile. "Though I am afraid I do not understand exactly what you mean."

"It is no laughing matter." The chaplain's tone was cool and collected-more impressive than it was used to be. "The man whose name I believe is Oliver Mankell has bewitched me. He was the second man in the third row on my right-hand side in chapel. I could make out that his number was B 27. He cast on me a spell."

There was silence. Even the inspector felt that it was a delicate matter to accuse the chaplain outright of lunacy. An interruption came from an unexpected quarter-from the chief warder.

"It's my belief that man Mankell's been up to his games about those cells."

The interruption was the more remarkable, because there was generally war-not always passive-between the chief warder and the chaplain. Every one looked at Mr. Murray.

"What is this I hear about the cells?" asked Dr. Livermore.

The governor answered:

"Yesterday the men were all locked in their night-cells. This morning they were all locked out-that is, we found them all seemingly fast asleep, each man in front of his cell-door."

"They were all locked in except one man, and that man was Mankell-and he was the only man who was not locked out." Thus the chief warder.

"And do you suggest," said the doctor, "that he had a finger in the pie?"

"It's my belief he did it all. Directly I set eyes upon the man I knew there was something about him I couldn't quite make out. He did it all! Have you heard, sir, how he came to the gate?"

Mr. Murray was, in general, a reticent man. It was not his way to express decided opinions in the presence of authorities, or indeed of any one else. Mr. Paley, who knew his man, eyed him with curiosity.

"What was there odd about that?"

"Why, instead of the constable bringing him, it was him who brought the constable. When they opened the gate there was him with the policeman over his shoulder."

In spite of Mr. Murray's evident earnestness, there were some of his hearers who were unable to repress a smile.

"Do you mean that the constable was drunk?"

"That's the queer part of it. It was John Mitchell. I've known him for two-and-twenty years. I never knew him have a glass too much before. I saw him soon afterwards-he was all right then. He said he had only had three half-pints. He was quite himself till he got near the gate, when all of a sudden he went queer all over."

"Possibly the ale was drugged," suggested the doctor.

"I don't know nothing about that, but I do know that the same hand that played that trick was the same hand that played the tricks with the cells."

"Consider a moment what you are saying, Murray. How are three hundred locks to be tampered with in the middle of the night by a man who is himself a prisoner? One moment-But even that is nothing compared to the feat of carrying three hundred men fast asleep in bed-bed and all-through three hundred closed doors, under the very noses of the officers on guard-think of doing all that singlehanded!"

"It was witchcraft."

When the chief warder said this, Major Hardinge exploded.

"Witchcraft! The idea of the chief warder of an English prison talking about witchcraft at this time of day! It's quite time you were superannuated, sir."

"The man, Mankell, certainly bewitched me."

"Bewitched you!" As the Major faced the chaplain he seemed to find it difficult to restrain his feelings. "May I ask what sort of idea you mean to convey by saying he bewitched you?"

"I will explain so far as I am able." The chaplain paused to collect his thoughts. All eyes were fixed upon him. "I intended to say something to the men touching the events of yesterday and this morning. As I came down to the altar-rail I was conscious of a curious sensation-as though I was being fascinated by a terrible gaze which was burning into my brain. I managed to pronounce the first few words. Involuntarily looking round, I met the eyes of the man Mankell. The instant I did so I was conscious that something had passed from him to me, something that made my tongue utter the words you heard. Struggling with all my might, I momentarily regained the exercise of my own will. It was only for a moment, for in an instant he had mastered me again. Although I continued to struggle, my tongue uttered the words he bade it utter, until I suppose my efforts to repel his dominion brought on a kind of fit. That he laid on me a spell I am assured."

There was a pause when the chaplain ceased. That he had made what he supposed to be a plain and simple statement of facts was evident. But then the facts were remarkable ones. It was the doctor who broke the silence.

"Suppose we have the man in here, so that we can put him through his facings?"

The governor stroked his beard

"What are you going to say to him? You can hardly charge him with witchcraft. He is here because he has been pretending to magic powers."

The doctor started.

"No! Is that so? Then I fancy we have the case in a nutshell. The man is what old-fashioned people used to call a mesmerist-hypnotism they call it nowadays, and all sorts of things."

"But mesmerism won't explain the cells!"

"I'm not so sure of that-at any rate, it would explain the policeman who was suddenly taken queer. Let's have the man in here."

"The whole thing is balderdash," said the Major with solemnity. "I am surprised, as a man of sane and healthy mind, to hear such stuff talked in an English prison of to-day."

"At least there will be no harm in our interviewing Mr. Mankell. Murray, see that they send him here." The chief warder departed to do the governor's bidding. Mr. Paley turned to the chaplain. "According to you, Mr. Hewett, we are subjecting ourselves to some personal risk by bringing him here. Is that so?"

"You may smile, Mr. Paley, but you may find it no laughing matter after all. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in man's philosophy."

"You don't mean to say," burst out the Major, "that you, a man of education, a clergyman, chaplain of an English prison, believe in witchcraft?"

"It is not a question of belief-it is a question of fact. That the man cast on me a spell, I am well assured. Take care that he does not do the same to you."

The governor smiled. The doctor laughed. The enormity of the suggestion kept the Major tongue-tied till Mankell appeared.

CHAPTER III

THE SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF THE PRISON OFFICIALS

Although Mankell was ushered in by the chief warder, he was in actual charge of Warder Slater. The apartment into which he was shown was not that in which prisoners ordinarily interviewed the governor. There a cord, stretched from wall to wall, divided the room nearly in half. On one side stood the prisoner, with the officer in charge of him; on the other sat the governor. Here there was no cord. The room-which was a small one-contained a single table. At one end sat Mr. Paley, on his right sat Major Hardinge, the chaplain stood at his left, and just behind the Major sat Dr. Livermore. Mankell was told to stand at the end which faced the governor. A momentary pause followed his entrance-all four pairs of eyes were examining his countenance. He for his part bore himself quite easily, his eyes being fixed upon the governor, and about the corners of his lips hovered what was certainly more than the suspicion of a smile.

"I have sent for you," Mr. Paley began, "because I wish to ask you a question. You understand that I make no charge against you, but-do you know who has been tampering with the locks of the cells?"

The smile was unmistakable now. It lighted up his saturnine visage, suggesting that here was a man who had an eye-possibly almost too keen an eye-for the ridiculous. But he gave no answer.

"Do you hear my question, Mankell? Do you know who has been tampering with the locks of the cells?"

Mankell extended his hands with a little graceful gesture which smacked of more southern climes.

"How shall I tell you?"

"Tell the truth, sir, and don't treat us to any of your high faluting."

This remark came from the Major-not in too amiable a tone of voice.

"But in this land it would seem that truth is a thing that wise men shun. It is for telling the truth that I am here."

"We don't want any of your insolence, my man! Answer the governor's question if you don't want to be severely punished. Do you know who has been playing hanky-panky with the cells?"

"Spirits of the air."

As he said this Mankell inclined his head and looked at the Major with laughter in his eyes.

"Spirits of the air! What the devil do you mean by spirits of the air?"

"Ah! what do I mean? To tell *you* that," laying a stress upon the pronoun, "would take a year."

"The fellow's an insolent scoundrel," spluttered the Major.

"Come, Mankell, that won't do," struck in Mr. Paley. "Do I understand you to say that you do know something about the matter?"

"Know!" The man drew himself up, laying the index finger of his right hand upon the table with a curiously impressive air. "What is there that I do not know?"

"I see. You still pretend, then, to the possession of magic powers?"

"Pretend!" Mankell laughed. He stretched out his hands in front of him with what seemed to be his favourite gesture, and laughed-in the face of the authorities.

"Suppose you give us an example of your powers?"

The suggestion came from the doctor. The Major exploded.

"Don't talk stuff and nonsense! Give the man three days' bread and water. That is what he wants."

"You do not believe in magic, then?" Mankell turned to the Major with his laughing eyes.

"What's it matter to you what I believe? You may take my word for it that I don't believe in impudent mountebanks like you."

The only reply Mankell gave was to raise his hand-if that might be called a reply-in the way we sometimes do when we call for silence, and there was silence in the room. All eyes were fixed upon the prisoner. He looked each in turn steadily in the face. Then, still serenely smiling, he gently murmured, "If you please."

There still was silence, but only for a moment. It was broken by Warder Slater. That usually decorous officer tilted his cap to the back of his head, and thrust his hands into his breeches pockets-hardly the regulation attitude in the presence of superiors.

"I should blooming well like to know what this means! 'Ere have I been in this 'ere jail eleven years, and I've never been accused before of letting men out of their night-cells, let alone their beds and bedding, and I don't like it, so I tell you straight."

The chief warder turned with automatic suddenness towards the unexpectedly and unusually plain-spoken officer.

"Slater, you're a fool!"

"I'm not the only one in the place! There's more fools here besides me, and some of them bigger ones as well!"

While these compliments were being exchanged, the higher officials sat mutely looking on. When the chief warder seemed at a loss for an answer, the chaplain volunteered a remark. He addressed himself to Warder Slater.

"It's my opinion that the governor's a bigger fool than you are, and that the inspector's a still bigger fool than he is."

"And it's my belief, Mr. Hewett," observed the doctor, "that you're the biggest fool of all."

"It would serve him right," remarked the governor, quietly, "if somebody were to knock him down."

"Knock him down! I should think it would-and kick him too!"

As he said this the Major glared at the chaplain with threatening eyes.

There was silence again, broken by Warder Slater taking off his cap and then his tunic, which he folded up carefully and placed upon the floor, and turning his shirt-sleeves up above his elbows, revealing as he did so a pair of really gigantic arms.

"If any man says I let them men out of the cells, I'm ready to fight that man, either for a gallon of beer or nothing. I don't care if it's the inspector, or who it is."

"I suspect," declared the chaplain, "that the inspector's too great a coward to take you on, but if he does I'm willing to back Slater for half-a-crown. I am even prepared to second him."

Putting his hands under his coat-tails, the chaplain looked up at the ceiling with a resolute air.

"If you do fight Slater, Hardinge, I should certainly commence by giving the chaplain a punch in the eye."

So saying, the governor leaned back in his chair, and began drumming on the table with the tips of his fingers. The doctor rose from his seat. He gave the inspector a hearty slap on the back.

"Give him beans!" he cried. "You ought to be able to knock an over-fed animal like Slater into the middle of next week before he's counted five."

"I've no quarrel with Slater," the inspector growled, "and I've no intention of fighting him; but as the chaplain seems to be so anxious for a row, I'll fight him with the greatest pleasure."

"If there's goin' to be any fighting," interposed the chief warder, "don't you think I'd better get a couple of sponges and a pail of water?"

"I don't know about the sponges," said the governor; "I don't fancy you will find any just at hand. But you might get a pail of water, I think."

The chief warder left the room.

"I'm not a fighting man," the chaplain announced; "and in any case, I should decline to soil my hands by touching such an ill-mannered ruffian as Major Hardinge."

"I say," exclaimed the doctor, "Hardinge, you're not going to stand that?"

The Major sprang from his seat, tore off his coat, and flung it on to the ground with considerably less care than Warder Slater had done. He strode up to the chaplain.

"Beg my pardon, or take a licking!"

The Major clenched his fists. He assumed an attitude which, if not exactly reminiscent of the pets of the fancy, was at least intended to be pugilistic. The chaplain did not flinch.

"You dare to lay a finger on me, you bullying blackguard."

The Major did dare. He struck out, if not with considerable science, at any rate with considerable execution. The chaplain went down like a log. At that moment the chief warder entered the room. He had a pail of water in his hand. For some reason, which was not altogether plain, he threw its contents upon the chaplain as he lay upon the floor.

While these-considering the persons engaged-somewhat irregular proceedings had been taking place, Mankell remained motionless, his hand upraised-still with that smile upon his face. Now he lowered his hand.

"Thank you very much," he said.

There was silence again-a tolerably prolonged silence. While it lasted, a change seemed to be passing over the chief actors in the scene. They seemed to be awaking, with more or less rapidity, to the fact that a certain incongruity characterised their actions and their language. There stood Warder Slater, apparently surprised and overwhelmed at the discovery that his hat and coat were off, and his shirtsleeves tucked up above his elbows. The chief warder, with the empty pail in his hand, presented a really ludicrous picture of amazement. He seemed quite unable to realise the fact that he had thrown the contents over the chaplain. The inspector's surprise appeared to be no less on finding that, in his pugilistic ardour, he had torn off his coat and knocked the chaplain down. The doctor, supporting him in the rear, seemed to be taken a little aback. The governor, smoothing his hair with his hand, seemed to be in a hopeless mist. It was the chaplain, who rose from the floor with his handkerchief to his nose, who brought it home to them that the scene which had just transpired had not been the grotesque imaginings of some waking dream.

"I call you to witness that Major Hardinge has struck me to the ground, and the chief warder has thrown on me a pail of water. What conduct may be expected from ignorant criminals when such is the behaviour of those who are in charge of them, must be left for others to judge."

They looked at one another. Their feelings were momentarily too deep for words.

"I think," suggested the governor, with quavering intonation, "I think-that this man-had better-be taken away."

Warder Slater picked up his hat and coat, and left the room, Mankell walking quietly beside him. Mr. Murray followed after, seeming particularly anxious to conceal the presence of the pail. Mr. Hewett, still stanching the blood which flowed from his nose, fixed his eyes on the inspector.

"Major Hardinge, if, twenty-four hours after this, you are still an Inspector of Prisons, all England shall ring with your shame. Behind bureaucracy-above it-is the English press." The chaplain moved towards the door. On the threshold he paused. "As for the chief warder, I shall commence by indicting him for assault." He took another step, and paused again. "Nor shall I forget that the governor aided and abetted the inspector, and that the doctor egged him on."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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