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LONDON

ADELPHI TERRACE

MCMVIII

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THE QUESTS OF PAUL BECK

By

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CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

IT may be objected that among all these stories there is no record of failure on the part of Mr Beck. The incredulous question will be asked: Was he always successful? The answer may be given in a confidential whisper; he was not; nearly always, not quite. But only his successes are published because the details are largely derived from after-dinner chats with the unconscious Mr Beck himself. Like other people less famous he did not like to talk much about his failures. Besides, it would be hardly fair to put them into print if he did. There is another reason stronger still. Failures make dull stories. To anyone who has read his adventures it must be plain that Mr Beck is not devoid of that natural, unaffected vanity which is one of the most agreeable of social qualities because it is so conducive to good humour. He was surprised, but he did not even pretend to be displeased, when he found himself famous. He was frankly delighted at the popularity his adventures obtained, not merely in Great Britain and Ireland, but in France, Germany and Sweden, where they have been translated and published in sixpenny editions. It is with his express permission that the following stories are told. "They are too flattering," he said, and, unlike other people who say that, he meant it. It will be for the readers to judge if he was right.

THE
QUESTS OF PAUL BECK

I
THE VOICE FROM THE DEAD

PLAINLY Mr Beck was just about to start on a journey. Piled together in the middle of his study floor were a bulging Gladstone bag, strapped and locked, an overcoat, a travelling-rug, a salmon rod, a trout rod, and a fishing-basket.

He looked up over his shoulder from his desk, where he was finishing a letter. "You might fetch a hansom, Burns," he said to his factotum, who was putting his things together.

"Yes, sir," said Burns, and started for the door.

Then the telephone bell rang in its little glass closet in the corner of the room.

"See to that, Burns. Tell whoever it is that I have gone off to the country. It's only anticipating the truth by a minute or so."

"Yes, sir."

"Halloa! Are you there? Yes; are you there?" —the usual interchanges went on.

"Yes," Mr Beck heard Burns say. "No; gone

away to the country, left no address. Cannot be done. I tell you it's impossible."

"Well?" asked Mr Beck.

"Must see you, sir. I said you had left no address. Says someone must know where you are. Most important."

"They all say that if a teaspoon is stolen."

"She says it's a matter of life and death," said Burns.

"She?" Mr Beck got up from his chair.

"Yes, sir; a lady's voice, particular clear and most distinct, sir."

A smile wrinkled Burns' face as he made way for his master at the telephone.

It was a lady's voice that spoke—a very pleasant voice despite the metallic twang of the instrument.

"Mr Beck? Is it really! Oh! I'm so glad. I knew I should find you. I want you here at once. Yes, Ringwood Castle; you know Simon Rutherford —he has been missing for two days. Yes, we have searched everywhere. I'm his daughter, his only child, Josephine Rutherford. Do please come at once. Oh! thanks ever so much."

"Burns," said Mr Beck, ruefully turning from the telephone, "you may put those rods back. I'm not going fishing—for fish."

"But I thought, sir—"

"Never mind what you thought. Go and call a hansom and put the bag in it. I'll catch the 10.40 if you look sharp."

The case *was* important. Simon Rutherford, the millionaire, had vanished out of the palace he had built for himself on the slope of a sunny hill amid

embowering trees—vanished from the midst of an army of attendants. "Here," thought Mr Beck, as he leant back in the first-class carriage of the train that he had caught with a second to spare, "is a problem worth solving." The pleasant voice that called to him for help through the telephone made the problem more exciting.

A small electric motor waited for him at the station and bowled him along a broad, smooth road to Ringwood Castle.

For half its length the avenue of chestnut trees, which were huge cones of flower, ran up a steep incline. At a curve Mr Beck caught sight of the Castle, and was startled by its magnificence. Mr Rutherford, when he purchased the estate from the impoverished Lord Hazelton, had pulled down the crazy family mansion and had built Ringwood Castle on its site. He was fortunate in his architect and in his own supreme ignorance of architecture. The stately building of grey stone, with towers massive yet graceful, that rose above the tallest of the trees, crowned the hill superbly, and harmonised with the surrounding landscape.

The motor wheeled like a swallow on the wing, and left Mr Beck at the door.

A girl waited for him in the hall and captured him the moment he appeared. A tall girl, with the figure of Diana, and gold hair coiled like a crown on her shapely head.

"So glad you've come!" she cried impetuously, as she led him along the corridor to a spacious room that looked out through a French window on the garden. The room might have been mistaken for

a bachelor's "den" but for its neatness and the absence of tobacco.

There were golf clubs, and tennis racquets and fishing rods. But there was also a couple of bookcases with rows of standard books in honest, workaday binding, meant for use not show. The place, with its light wicker chairs and its spindle-shanked tables, was neat as a captain's cabin.

"Sit down there," the girl said, pushing a comfortable chair to Mr Beck, "and let me introduce myself. I'm Josephine Rutherford, only daughter of the man who has vanished. I sent for you because I needed you horribly."

Mr Beck smiled. His eyes swept the room at one glance, and lighted on a man seated in a low chair at the corner furthest from the door.

"That's Mr Herbert Ross, M.P. He knows who you are. I don't mean to keep any secrets from you, Mr Beck. Mr Ross and I are engaged to be married."

Mr Beck had already guessed her secret as he summed up the man at a glance. Tall—so far as could be judged from the loose stretch of his long limbs as he lay back in his low chair—handsome, too, after a fashion; a dark, intelligent, keen face alive with intense earnestness—the face of a man not easily to be baulked in anything he had set his heart on.

His dark eyes searched the face of the detective, who nodded and smiled at the introduction.

"Mr Ross belongs to what I have to say, Mr Beck," Miss Rutherford went on. "I'll say it as quick as I can, because I may be interrupted.

"We met first—Mr Ross and myself—when he came down here to contest the seat against father and won it. I went to one of his meetings and liked his speech immensely. We met afterwards and became friends, and to make a long story short he liked me, and we got engaged to be married. Father was furious. Herbert is poor, of course—he is a barrister in London and hasn't much practice yet.

"But it was not that so much which made father mad. He never could forgive one who had thwarted him, and he had set his heart on a seat in Parliament, so Herbert was forbidden the house.

"I was ordered not to write to him, an order to which I didn't pay the least attention. About a week later a young widow—at least, she said she was a widow—was brought down here to be a companion to me. You will see Lucy Lalladay presently, so I won't say a word that might prejudice you against her. I didn't like her, I may say that much, but father did immensely. He could do nothing without consulting her—had her constantly in his study, where I was never allowed, and later went on pleasure trips to London with her. He was infatuated with her—" She broke off suddenly.

"Mr Beck, I am as certain as I can be that this wretched woman is at the bottom of his disappearance."

"But you have told me nothing yet about his disappearance, Miss Rutherford," said Mr Beck, ignoring the sudden onslaught on the widow.

"Oh! there is very little to tell. Father had just come home from a trip with this woman—the way she made eyes at him was disgusting! The

next afternoon he was in the study alone with Mr Mark Strangley, his private secretary. Mr Strangley had left the room for a few moments, and when he came back my father had disappeared. Mr Strangley thought little about it at the time.

"There is a glass door opening on the lawn, and he fancied perhaps father had gone out for a stroll. But when father didn't come in to dinner we had a search made for him through the grounds. It was no use. Then there was another surprise. That woman confessed that they had been married a week ago in London by special licence, and pretended to go into hysterics, to make matters worse. Well, we had a farther search next day, but still no sign; so—"

"You sent for me," said Mr Beck. "Anything more?"

"Oh, yes! There is another thing most important. Herbert comes to see me, of course, whenever he can spare time from his work in London—sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the evening. He was seen about the place. He is well known, and there have been whispers."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Mr Beck," spoke up Herbert Ross from his corner, "I am strongly suspected of having murdered Mr Simon Rutherford."

"Father is not dead," persisted the daughter; "no one would kill him except that woman, and she couldn't if she wanted to. You will find him for us, Mr Beck?"

"I will try," said Mr Beck.

"Would you like to see the study now?"

"Why, certainly, but I would like just one word

more with you before we go. What kind of man is this secretary? I can guess what you think of Mrs Lalladay, or I should say Mrs Rutherford"—the daughter winced at the name, but Mr Beck did not seem to notice. "Now I want to know what you think of Mr Mark Strangley?"

"Oh! he is a good sort enough; not too clever perhaps, but honest and straight as a die. For the first few days after she came I thought he was going to fall in love with the widow, but he soon found her out. Afterwards he used to laugh at her with me, and was almost as indignant as myself at the way she played upon father's folly. He even spoke to him about it, and was sharply told to mind his own business. It was Mark—Mr Strangley I mean—that advised me to telephone for you."

Again Mr Herbert Ross spoke straight out from his corner. "I have seen Mark Strangley only three times," he said, "and I believe him to be a thoroughpaced scoundrel. Well, well, Joe," good-humouredly but firmly withal to the girl, who was about to protest, "we are not likely to agree on this point. Time may tell who's right."

Then to Mr Beck very courteously: "I have heard of you, sir, in many quarters and always in high praise. I am glad you have come. If any man living can unravel this mystery it is you. Good-bye, Joe. I cannot stay here, you know. I have taken a room at the Star and Anchor. It's not a quarter of a mile off, Mr Beck, and I will come at a word if you want me."

The two lovers stood for a moment together at the door. Mr Beck happened to be busy with a note-

book at the moment and did not look up till the girl spoke to him again.

Something of the life and buoyancy was gone out of her voice and face when her lover left.

"You would like to see the study now?"

The study was a wide, airy room on the right of the hall, with a great, ebony roll-top American desk in the centre. The floor was of polished oak, with no rug or carpet to mar the rich, glossy expanse. The walls, painted a rich maroon, made an effective background for masterpieces of Romney, Gainsborough, and Reynolds—high-waisted, full-bosomed beauties, simpering seductively.

Other ornament there was none. An electric foot-warmer cushioned in furs was under the comfortable arm-chair at the desk, an electric cigar-lighter was at the writer's elbow, electric lamps—standard and suspended—were everywhere. There were half a dozen phonographs in the room, each perched on a little table of its own with high rubber castors that glided at a touch over the polished floor.

On the left of the desk was the door from the hall; to the right a large French window looked upon the lawn. Facing the writer as he sat at his desk was a huge safe ten feet square, painted, like the walls, a dark maroon, with polished brass handles.

It was the first thing that took Mr Beck's attention. He walked straight to it and tried the handle.

"Locked," said Miss Josephine; "my father had the key when he disappeared. Oh! is that you, Mark; how quietly you come in! Mr Beck, this is my father's secretary, Mr Strangley, who asked me to send for you."

Mr Beck's genial smile expressed his gratitude while his keen eyes studied Mr Mark Strangley.

It was an easy book to read. The figure of an athlete, clean and strong, a handsome face, blue-eyed, flaxen-haired, not too clever, and boyish for his age, which might be thirty. This was Mark Strangley as Mr Beck first saw him.

"Glad to see you, sir," he said, with hearty welcome, as he took Mr Beck's hand in a firm grasp. "I'm glad for Miss Rutherford's sake, for all our sakes, that you have come."

Miss Rutherford seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Perhaps I'd better leave you two alone," she said.

Plainly she wanted to be asked to stay, but Mr Beck did not ask her. On the contrary, he gallantly held the door open for her.

"You will find me in my own room when you want me," she said as she passed out.

"A charming young lady," said Mr Beck when the door had closed.

"A queen," said Mr Strangley, in accents of undisguised adoration; "I pity her from the bottom of my heart."

"But why pity?"

"First for the loss of her father, then—Oh! come in"—impatiently.

There had come a timid tap to the door.

As it opened softly Mr Strangley's impatience changed to deferential welcome. "Mrs Lalladay," he said very gently, "I beg pardon, I should say Mrs Rutherford; this is Mr Beck, the famous detective, of whom you have heard me speak."

Mr Beck, turning round, saw the most lovely woman he had ever looked at. All the old-fashioned similes were wanted to describe her: cheeks like the rose-leaf, eyes blue as the violet, hair like fine gold, alive with wave and curl. She was small, but of figure marvellously erect, lithe, delicately poised as a fairy. The winsome little lady was dressed all in black, plain, close-fitting black—a perfect foil to her rare beauty.

She divided an appealing smile between the two men.

"Is there any news?" she asked. The question was to Mr Strangley, but Mr Beck was not excluded.

"None yet," Mark Strangley answered, "but we must not despair. While there's life there's hope, you know. If any man living can find your husband Mr Beck can and will."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" She looked Mr Beck full in the eyes, and then gave him her hand impulsively—a white, shapely, firm little hand. As usual, his kindly face induced confidence. "They say I didn't love my husband," she complained, "because he was older than I; that I married him for his money; but it's false. I couldn't help his leaving everything to me—could I? But I loved him for himself alone, and now that I have lost him my heart is broken. We had a little quarrel that morning. I spoke in favour of his daughter and vexed him. He left me in anger, and I may never see him again." The violet eyes were bright with tears, but she held them back bravely. "I will give you everything I have in the world if you find him for me."

Beauty in distress always appealed to Mr Beck.

"There is no use meeting trouble half-way," he said kindly. "Reward or no reward, you may be sure I'll find him if I can." He did not add "for your sake," but it was plain from his tone that he meant it.

A fleeting blush showed she knew he meant it. "I won't keep you from your work," she said. "I wish you all good luck and Godspeed."

Mark Strangley held the door open for her as she went out.

Mr Beck's eyes were on his face. "If that man is not in love with the widow," Mr Beck thought, "he is a very fine actor."

"Let us get to work," he said briskly, when the door closed. "There has been already too much delay."

"Won't you have lunch first?"

"No, work first, if you please—lunch later. How long were you out of the room when he disappeared?"

"About five minutes, not more."

"Could he not have gone out by the same door that you went by?"

"Impossible. He would have to pass through the room where I was looking for a paper he sent me for."

"Then he must have gone out through the glass door?"

"So it would seem, unless he went up the chimney."

Mr Beck did not resent the sneer. "Yes," he said, "it seems quite obvious, but one cannot afford to take even the obvious for granted."

He had opened the glass door and looked out.

The path ran in full view for at least a quarter of a mile.

"If he had gone that way you must have seen him when you returned," he said to Mr Strangley, who had come up to the door and looked through over his shoulder.

"Unless he had turned in on the grass, past that clump of trees to the right," Strangley answered.

"Quite so," said Mr Beck, approvingly. "I expected you to say just that. I wonder is it too late to find any sign? Come along!"

Bending low he scrutinised the edge of the pathway closely as he walked. Twice he found a break in the clean-cut edge, examined it carefully and went on. The third time he found the mark of one of the new-fashioned round rubber heels in the turf. The ground had been soft when the mark was made—it was hard now. The segment of the circular heel was cut deep and clear.

"Mr Rutherford wore rubber heels," he said to the other, rather as one who makes a statement than one who asks a question.

Strangley nodded. Mr Beck was on his knees on the grass sward with a magnifying glass close to the ground. He put the grass softly aside as a surgeon parts the hair to examine a scalp wound.

"Was Mr Rutherford a heavy man?"

Mr Strangley did not hear him at first, and he repeated the question. "Well, no, he was rather light and wiry, but he had big feet, if that's what you mean."

"Right," said Mr Beck, "here is a full footmark." He got up from his knees and walked on briskly,

picking up the trail as if it were the "scent" of a paper-chase, though Strangley's eyes could find only a few vague marks amongst the grass. The track skirted the woods and led them to the banks of a deep, dumb river that ran slowly, level with its brim. Along the banks of the river the track led them for about a mile, tending always away from the house.

Under the shelter of a clump of beech Mr Beck stopped short and began to cast about like a sporting dog that makes a dead set, weakens on it when he finds the bird has just left, and begins beating cautiously again. He examined every mark about the place with scrupulous care, went on about twenty yards to where the river was crossed by a new iron bridge, and walked a little with bent head on the further side. Mr Strangley watched him curiously all the time, till he came back at last to the place where he had first pointed his game, and looked fixedly at the water.

Then very quietly he said to Mr Strangley: "Mr Rutherford's body is out there, under the water."

Mr Strangley gasped, and no wonder; the colour left his face. He gazed at Mr Beck dumbfounded.

"Sure?" he asked at last in a frightened whisper.

"As sure as you and I are on the banks he is under the water. We can do no more at present. Let us get back now and have that lunch you spoke about. After lunch we will drag the river and bring the body home."

They walked in silence by the water's edge back to

the house. In the midst of the brightness of the fair scene and sunshine, of green leaf and singing birds, they were haunted by the tragedy hidden by the dark water of the deep stream that moved so stealthily under the trees.

"Say nothing to the ladies," whispered Mr Strangley, as they went back through the French window, "until you are quite sure."

"I am quite sure," replied Mr Beck, "but I shall say nothing."

His certainty was justified. Out of the dark depths of the river, at the very spot he pointed to, the men fished up the draggled body of Mr Rutherford, millionaire. The pockets of the dead man's coat bulged with stones. A horrid sight the body was as it lay there on the soft grass under the trees, while the moving boughs let the sunshine trickle through, and the birds sang unconscious of the horror.

Again Mr Strangley's first kindly thought was for the women.

"We must get him quietly to the house."

Mr Beck nodded.

"Have the coroner sent for," he added; "we should have the inquest to-morrow."

The body was composed in decent state, the staring eyes closed, the grey hands crossed over the breast, before his wife and daughter were told of the ghastly discovery.

Mr Beck watched them closely as they came, one after the other, into the room with the dead.

The daughter made no display of violent grief. She moved softly to the bedside and kissed the poor, clammy forehead with a kiss that seemed to have in

it as much of forgiveness as of affection. She knelt for a moment at the bedside and went out quietly as she entered.

The widow, on the other hand, was distraught. "I loved him, I loved him," she cried continuously, "and now I shall never see him again. It was I drove him to it. I was unkind to him. I am his murderess."

From the first she assumed he had committed suicide, and the jury's verdict justified her instinct.

They found the customary verdict with the charitable addition, "during temporary insanity."

Mr Beck's work was done, but he remained a day or two at the special invitation of the widow, who, when the first paroxysm of her grief was passed, was lavish in childlike admiration and gratitude.

"But for you," she exclaimed, "we should never have found him. My life would have passed in a long agony of suspense. Horrible as the truth is the suspense would have been more horrible. He would never have lain in consecrated ground. I could never have watered his grave with my tears."

Not she alone, but all the neighbourhood were full of wonder and admiration at the skill with which the detective went straight to the root of the mystery.

There was one exception—Miss Joe Rutherford was not in the least enthusiastic. If Mr Beck expected congratulations from her when she summoned him to her bachelor's den he was disappointed.

He found her standing at the great bow window, and before she turned had time to admire the grace of that tall, pliant figure clear against the evening

light. He noticed as she turned that the comely face was pale, and the eyelids red with weeping.

"Sit down," she said abruptly. "I suppose I ought to thank you, but I cannot. The thing you have done is very clever and all that. But what does it come to? You have found the body, but you have not found the cause of death."

"The coroner's jury have found that," replied Mr Beck, innocently, "as was their business, and they have found it to be suicide."

"I don't believe it; I don't believe a word of it. Do you?"

The question was a sharp home-thrust—the frank eyes looked straight in his.

But Mr Beck never winced.

"I don't see what other verdict the jury could find," he answered slowly. "The body was in the water; the footprints leading to the river were made by the boots on his feet; the doctor testified that he died of suffocation; there were no external marks on the body, except that the nails and knuckles were bruised and torn, but bruised knuckles and nails don't kill a man."

"How were they bruised and torn?"

"How can I tell? The coroner and the coroner's jury could not tell that. How can I?"

"Oh, I thought that you clever detectives knew everything."

He spread out his big hands deprecatingly like a clumsy Frenchman.

"My dear young lady, did I ever pretend to be clever, did I now? We detectives are like children with puzzle alphabets. We pick up letters here and

there and try to get them in their proper order to spell out a word or two. Don't smack me if I cannot get the letters right at first. I'm doing my best all the time."

Something in the contagious good-humour of the man captured her.

Her face lightened with a smile. "Forgive me," she said, "I'm an ungrateful, selfish thing. I know you did your best—and more than anyone else could do. I'm worried—you mustn't mind me. I suppose you heard that father left all he died possessed of to his widow? Mr Strangley drew the will and witnessed it, and never said a word, and he pretended to be fond of me. Oh, the cur! I'm sure it was she put him up to it."

"Do you stay on here?" Mr Beck asked sympathetically.

"Do I stay here! As if I would stay an hour longer than I could help under the same roof with that woman. I wouldn't take a crust of bread or a glass of water from her if I was starving and it was to save my life. There is an animal in India Kipling wrote about that knows a snake the first time it sees one, and wants to kill it. I feel just like that."

"She speaks most kindly of you."

"Of course she does. Aren't snakes always slimy? She came gushing to me here. She said we were sisters in sorrow—'let us weep together on his tomb.' I answered her pretty plainly."

"I'll warrant you did," said Mr Beck under his breath.

"But I could not vex her. Nothing I could say would vex her. She was most loving to the very last.

She—she wanted to kiss me." There was a break in her voice as she said it, but not even Mr Beck could say whether it was laughter or tears. "I am going away this evening," she went on calmly.

"Where?"

"Anywhere out of this."

"Don't go this evening. I'm staying over to-night. I may want you to-morrow."

"But," she began, but her eyes met Mr Beck's, grave, determined, all the smile gone from his face.

"I'll stay," she said, "if you wish it."

His finger went suddenly to his lips commanding silence. Then he pointed to the door.

His ears were quicker than hers, for after a long silence there came a gentle, timid knock.

Mr Beck turned the handle and opened the door, but he stepped aside as the young widow, more lovely than ever, more delicately *spirituelle* in her widow's weeds, came softly in.

The detective watched the high comedy of the meeting with quiet interest and amusement.

"I have returned," cooed the widow, softly, with hands stretched out in sweet entreaty.

"So I see," answered the girl, with implacable coldness. "May I ask why?"

"Oh! Josephine, Josephine!" cried the other, plaintively, "why will you reject my love? I want to be a sister to you."

"Look here, Mrs Lalladay, if that's your name, what's the use of telling these lies to me when you know I don't believe them; when you know that I know you hate me just as much as I hate you, and that's enough? You managed to get between my

father and myself. His eyes were blinded; mine are not. I know you from your heel to your top-knot. You have got all his money. You have robbed me of that. Cannot you be satisfied? Why must you worry me as well?"

"Why will you speak in this cruel way?"

"You want to get rid of me. Well, I am going to-morrow."

"I thought you said to-night."

The widow did not seem delighted at the change.

Joe Rutherford smiled scornfully.

"Mr Beck asked me to stay till to-morrow to have his company to London."

"I'm so glad," gushed the widow, correcting her mistake, "you have changed your mind. To-morrow I may persuade you to prolong your stay. Good-bye, dearest; good-bye, Mr Beck, I am very grateful to you too."

"You may have reason to be," Mr Beck said to himself as she left the room.

"Miss Rutherford," he added aloud when the door was closed, "I would advise you to telegraph for Mr Ross. I may have some startling news for you to-morrow. By the way, could you lend me an alarm clock? You are an open-air, early-rising young lady, likely to have one. Thanks! No, no, I answer no questions until to-morrow. I never speak till I am quite sure."

The greater part of the night Mr Beck spent in the dead man's study with the doors locked and no company but the pictures, the great safe and the phonographs.

Mr Strangley thought he heard loud shouting in

the room, and came out in his pyjamas to reconnoitre. Mr Beck opened the door to his knocking.

"Thought I heard shouting," Strangley said; "did you hear anything?"

"Nothing louder than my own voice," Mr Beck returned, smiling.

"Why the deuce didn't you go to your bed?" Strangley asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Thinking," Mr Beck answered gravely. "I am pretty nearly done."

"Well, good luck, anyway. I'm off."

Next morning, when the two men were breakfasting alone, by Mr Beck's special request, in the spacious study, Strangley reverted to the incident of the night before.

"Twopence for your thoughts, Beck," he said laughingly; "what were you pondering over last night?"

"The Rutherford mystery," Mr Beck answered gravely.

For a moment the other seemed taken quite aback by this unexpected reply.

"But there is no mystery now," he objected; "the puzzle has been solved, thanks to you, old man; a commonplace suicide after all."

"I'm not so sure of that," Mr Beck answered. "The evidence doesn't show how he got to the water."

"There were his own footprints leading straight to the bank."

"The footprints were heavier than so light a man could make. Besides, I found close to the place the faint trace of a stockinged foot. What if the

murderer, wearing the dead man's boots, had carried the corpse on his back to the river and changed the boots to the dead man's feet before he threw it in? "

Mr Strangley grew pale at the horrible suggestion. "But the man was drowned, suffocated," he stammered.

"He was suffocated," Mr Beck answered, "but was he drowned? There was no water found in the lungs, and then the hands were bruised and torn as if the wretched man, trapped in a living tomb, had beaten them in vain against the iron wall." Mr Beck's voice shook with the horror of his own imagining.

His companion was strangely affected. His face was ghastly, his eyes staring. He wiped a clammy forehead with a trembling hand. He seemed listening for some terrible sound.

It came! In the long pause suddenly it came.

There was quick beating of hands against the door of the great iron safe, and a faint cry of "Help! Help!" was heard, stifled and strangled by the iron walls.

Then Mark Strangley lost all self-control. "The dead speaks!" he cried, "the dead speaks! I will confess! I will confess! I murdered him! As he stood at the safe I thrust him in and slammed the door and locked it. That night I carried the body to the river. I murdered him—she enticed me to it. She had married him for his money; she hated him; she swore she would marry me when he was dead!"

The sudden opening of the door cut short his confession. The widow dashed into the room, not soft and gentle now, but tense with rage. The fury

of the wild cat—fierce, untamable—flamed from her eyes.

"You lie, you coward!" she screamed, "you coward and fool! If you murdered my husband you shall hang. I know nothing of it."

"Did you not urge me to it?"

"Never! Never!"

"And promise to marry me when he was dead?"

"Marry you, you wretched fool and craven!"

There was an infinite contempt in her voice which stung him to the quick.

"You shall pay for this," he cried, "though I hang for it!"

"Do your worst, fool—do your worst! You have no scrap of writing of mine, no particle of proof. You are the murderer—you cannot turn King's evidence. I know that much law. No one will believe your lies. I defy you! I defy you!" She pointed a small, white finger at him and laughed derisively. "I defy you, and your wise detective, and that great, stupid ploughman-girl—curse her! I defy you all!" She turned to Beck. "I don't care a farthing whether you hang that fool there or not. I have the will. Everything is mine."

Hereupon in his turn Mark Strangley broke into loud, derisive laughter.

"If I hang, my lady, you will starve!" he cried. "You know the law, do you? Then you know that the will was revoked by marriage. You revoked it yourself when you married the man you murdered. The will is not worth the paper it is written on."

There was a ring of truth in the man's savage triumph.

"Before Mr. Beck could interfere she turned the red, smoking blade on her own breast."

To face page 22.

The woman glared like a wild beast trapped—ready to bite and claw.

She turned again to Mr Beck.

"Is that true?"

"Quite true."

With a snarl she sprang like a wild cat on Strangley. A knife leapt out and flashed in the sunlight as she plunged it once, twice in his heart. Before Mr Beck could interfere she turned the red, smoking blade on her own breast, and sank beside her victim on the floor.

At that moment there came a knocking at the door.

Mr Beck rushed to turn the key in the lock.

"Who's there?" he called out.

"It's I, Joe Rutherford. You said you would have exciting news for me."

"I have. The mystery is solved, the tragedy ended," answered Mr Beck, through the closed door. "You shall know all later."

A month later he told the strange story in detail to Joe Rutherford, heiress, and Herbert Ross, her affianced husband.

"I was right," whispered the girl, with pale lips. "I knew the woman was the murderess. I am sorry for poor Strangley."

"He got his deserts. He was the viler of the two," retorted Ross, fiercely.

"But how came that voice?" queried the girl. "How came that voice from the dead to force him to confess? Did he imagine it was a real voice he heard?"

"It was very real," replied Mr Beck. "The night before I prepared that little surprise for him. I set

a phonograph in the safe with an alarum clock to start it at the right moment. I worked up to the crowning horror. I guessed the voice from the dead would drag a confession from the murderer, and I was right."

II

TRIFLES LIGHT AS AIR

IT was written in a neat, feminine hand that contrasted strangely with its purport; not a letter out of place, not a comma missed, not an "i" undotted or a "t" uncrossed. Mr Beck read the note for the third time with a frown of perplexity on his good-humoured face.

"DEAR SIR,"—it ran—"I feel I have no right whatever to trouble you, and cannot complain if you throw my letter aside. But from what I have heard and read about you it seems just possible that you will help, and the chance, however remote, is worth taking. There has been a terrible murder here. Squire Ackland has been shot through the heart. His nephew, Mr Richard Ackland, was found guilty of murder at the Coroner's inquest to-day, and everyone says the evidence was conclusive. But the Rev. Archdeacon Greaves believes him innocent, and he has had the best opportunity of judging. I am sure he would be anxious that the matter should be placed in your hands. But I have not told him I am writing, lest you should refuse.—Yours faithfully, ALICE DALE.

"*P.S.*—The railway station is Woodland, on the Great Southern Line. The rectory is a mile and a half from the station. I have no money to pay you."

"Now what does it all mean?" pondered Mr Beck. "The girl wants me down on her own account. She has some strong interest in Mr Richard Ackland. What is it—for or against? Who is she, anyway, and where does the parson come in? She must be a remarkable girl who could write so precisely on such a subject. A wonderfully cool card! and she has written just the letter that would bring any man down."

The direction on the letter was a hamlet, half town, half village, in a remote part of Gloucestershire. For reasons that will be appreciated it is better not to be too precise about name or locality.

Mr Beck sent a wire: "Down by next train, arrive two"—and went on deliberately with his substantial breakfast, pausing every now and then for another look at the letter, pulling the tangle about in his mind to loosen the knots.

"What's her little game, I wonder? Clergyman doesn't know she was sending for me. Did she want him to know? Was she afraid he'd stop her if he got the chance? He believes in the young man's innocence. She says nothing about herself. Does she want the young man cleared or hanged? Did love or spite make her send that letter? Well, I'll know that when I go down—a girl cannot keep a secret."

The railway station was a rural cottage at the end of a short branch line, which had stopped

disheartened about a mile and a half outside the village. Mr Beck left his bag at the station with the stout, good-humoured, elderly man that was a compromise between porter and stationmaster. He walked to the village through a deep lane carpeted at the borders with wild flowers, and fenced with high green walls of hawthorn sprayed with white blossoms, and alive with the chirping and flutter of birds.

A quarter of a mile from the village he passed by the girls' school, a red-tiled and narrow-windowed cottage, smothered in creepers and built on the verge of a clear, shallow stream. A murmur of fresh young voices poured out through the open window into the spring air, to mingle with the babbling of the brook and the bird-songs. A little further the ground, steeply sloping, lifted him over the red-roofed village which nestled in the valley. The pointed spar of the village church sprang up through the trees sharp and clear in the pure air. To the right the gables and turrets of a red-brick Elizabethan building showed over the billowy woods.

Mr Beck felt the tranquillising beauty of the scene keenly, though he would have found it hard to put his feelings in words.

"Rum scene for a murder," was his prosaic comment as he strode on in the direction of the church, rightly guessing he would find the vicarage in its shadow.

If he doubted his welcome there the doubt was quickly removed. The vicar met him at the gate that led, through a shaven lawn dotted with lilacs, laburnum and standard rose bushes, to the vicarage—

a delightful, old-fashioned place made up chiefly of gables and bow windows.

Just for one moment a look of surprise flitted over the vicar's handsome face as he caught sight of the genial, innocent-looking visitor, so different from what he expected.

"I have the pleasure of meeting—?" He hesitated.

"Mr Beck," responded the other. "Don't look much like a detective, do I? But I'm lucky sometimes, and it's better to be lucky than clever."

The vicar shook his hand heartily.

"My dear sir, I'm charmed to meet you. I've heard of you, of course—who has not heard of Mr Beck? I was delighted when Miss Dale told me she had written to you and brought me your telegram to say you were coming down. Sad affair this, Mr Beck—so sudden and so mysterious!"

"Not much mystery," said Mr Beck, "if we are to judge by Miss Dale's account. The jury found the case clear."

"I trust you will reserve your judgment, my dear sir. You mustn't judge wholly by the bald facts; you must know the people as well; but I am forgetting my hospitality; lunch is waiting."

From the first moment he laid eyes on that handsome, intellectual face, Mr Beck knew that he had seen the vicar before. But they had passed from the soup to the cutlets in a pleasant little *tete-a-tete* luncheon before his memory found the man. Perhaps the quaint Indian trophies in the low-panelled room, grotesque idols, wrought brass and silver filigree, helped his memory.

"If I mistake not," he said, "I have the honour of lunching with the Rev. Ernest Greaves, the famous Indian missionary."

Mr Greaves was plainly pleased with the recognition, though he waved away the praise with a deprecatory white hand.

"I heard you speak in London, sir, on your return from the massacre," Mr Beck went on smoothly. "I was never so impressed with anything in my life. I had a word afterwards with the woman whose life you saved. I am honoured to meet you again, Mr Greaves, but I certainly never hoped to encounter you in a quiet Gloucestershire vicarage."

"Lord Ripondale is responsible for that," said Mr Greaves; "we will drink his health, if you don't mind; you'll find this Madeira tolerable. I have never set eyes on him to this hour, but he wrote to me to say that he 'liked a priest with pluck,' and offered me the living—eight hundred a year and a charming residence, as you see. The contrast is curious from the hourly perils of India. I have been here now for nearly two years, and there hasn't been a ripple of excitement on the current of our daily lives until this lamentable affair."

"Was it far from here the thing happened?"

"A couple of miles. If you have quite finished your lunch, Mr Beck, we might visit together the scene of the tragedy. We can talk as we walk and smoke if you care to."

Mr Beck declined the vicar's offer of a cigar. He took a stumpy briar-root pipe from his pocket and charged it with his own special mixture. The

vicar talked as they walked, and Mr Beck smoked and listened in stolid silence.

The detective noticed that the vicar walked a little lame and leant on a thick malacca cane with a curved ivory handle. "An arrow in the foot," the vicar explained, "and poisoned at that. One of the converts sucked the wound and died of the venom. The foot still aches a little at odd times, and I never stir out without a stick if I can help it."

Though the scene of the murder was only two miles from the vicarage, by the time they had got there Mr Beck knew all the vicar had to tell of the tragedy and the actors in it.

Squire Ackland, he learnt, was a middle-aged bachelor whose reputation was none of the best —a man of domineering character, with the characteristic vices and virtues of the aristocrat. He was overbearing, reckless of other people's rights or wishes, harsh to the verge of cruelty if thwarted.

On the other hand he was courageous, generous when pleased, and brutally candid. He specially prided himself on his truthfulness. "I never funked a danger or broke a promise, for good or ill," he had once boasted. But, as a rule, he was not given to boasting. He was unpopular in the neighbourhood, for he had scant regard for man's honour or woman's virtue, and he always carried a revolver, which he could use on occasion with deadly skill.

His nephew and heir, Richard Ackland, if the vicar was not prejudiced in his favour, was a vast improvement on the uncle, whom still in many ways he resembled. He, too, was of a domineering spirit,

but he was neither selfish nor cruel, and was specially chivalrous to women.

In courage and candour he rivalled his uncle. Indeed, his recklessness was a proverb. No sport attracted him that had not danger in it. He was generally known as "Dare-Devil Dick."

"A conflict between two such men," the vicar said, "was bound to be violent; for the occasion and result of that quarrel I am in some degree responsible."

"For the murder?" queried Mr Beck, imperturbably.

"Well, remotely, if we can call it a murder. I am responsible for bringing those two imperious, fiery-tempered men into violent conflict. Some months ago there was a vacancy in the position of village schoolmistress. The matter was left in my hands. I engaged a young girl whose mother I had once known. The girl was a lady by birth, but had fallen into straitened circumstances, and was glad to take the position. The fact that I happened to be vicar of the parish was, I may say, an inducement: for her mother, when dying, had commended her to my care. I had never even seen the girl at the time, but I felt for her as a father might.

"These details may seem irrelevant, Mr Beck," the vicar interrupted himself, "but you will find they have a bearing on the problem you have to solve. I will say nothing about the appearance of the young girl, Alice Dale. You will have an opportunity of judging for yourself. But I may say that, in my judgment, she is one of the sweetest and purest of women, incapable of evil. I fear I

weary you by my prosiness; I suppose it's the way with us parsons, but I will try to get to the end.

"Before the girl was a week here it chanced that both the uncle and nephew met her, and both fell desperately in love, but in a very different fashion. The nephew, headstrong and passionate as ever, wooed her like a gentleman to be his wife, but I understand—that is, I believe—got scant encouragement.

"The uncle—but I need not go into details. You will understand. It is hard to have to say harsh things of the dead, but he was a reprobate who scoffed alike at religion and at the virtue of women. Alice Dale was young and guileless; she scarcely knew his meaning when he spoke to her. But the warning instinct of virtue protected her.

"Something of his uncle's vile pursuit of the girl came, however, to the ears of the nephew. There was a stormy interview between the two. Both told me of it afterwards, and strangely enough their version was the same. The uncle made no secret of his purpose. The young man was furious with the elder, and raged and threatened to no purpose.

"'You young fool,' was the cynical, savage answer to all his protests, 'cannot you see it is to your interest I shouldn't marry! Lucky for you I don't want to. Go get a wife for yourself if you choose. I'll double your allowance; I'll treble it when you marry. But you must leave this young schoolmistress to me. You've got to stand out of my way, young man, or I'll cut you off with a

shilling. Then, if you please, ask the girl to marry you, and live together on your debts.'

"The young man turned pale—'the colour of a corpse, egad!' the uncle told me afterwards, 'and swore he would have my life if I hurt a hair of her head. Well, I don't want to hurt a hair of her head, so that's all right. I told him—eh, parson, I don't want to shock your reverence, so you had best wink the other eye if you find your schoolmistress and myself philandering.'

"Now comes the exciting part of the story."

Mr Beck's face was as inscrutable as ever.

"Yesterday as I was strolling through this wood—a favourite walk of mine—thinking out next Sunday's sermon, I came suddenly on the squire, sitting on that fallen tree yonder, smoking. I was passing with a curt 'good day,' when suddenly the thought flashed upon me what he was waiting for. Alice Dale used to pass that way every afternoon from the school to the cottage in the village where she lodged. He waited there to meet her alone. I was determined he should not have the chance.

"'By the way, squire,' I said, as politely as I could manage, 'there is a matter I want to consult you about. Your tenant, Giles Cossing, is down with fever, and I heard to-day when I called that two of his children have caught it. I understand that he is behindhand with his rent. Now I am quite sure that, knowing the circumstances, you—'

"'All right, parson,' he broke in rudely. 'Talk to me about it some other time. Confound it, man! don't you see I'm busy, and I don't want to be disturbed?'

"But I was not to be turned from my purpose. I affected to take his words as a jest.

"'Very well,' I replied lightly, 'I won't disturb you while you are so busy. It is a pleasant spot for a quiet smoke. I'll try a cigar myself, and when you have finished your business you'll let me have a word with you about Giles Cossing.'

"I found a seat at the further end of the fallen tree and lit a cigar. He growled out a curse between his teeth and glared at me like a wild beast. For a moment I thought he would strike me, but I carried this heavy stick, and I was not in the least afraid. For ten minutes we sat and smoked in silence. Then he gave in. 'Say what you've got to say quick, and go.'

"'I'm afraid it will take some time,' I said. He was quick to understand.

"'So that's the reason,' he snapped out.

"'Yes,' I replied, 'I mean to wait here till she comes, and walk with her to her lodgings.'

"'Aha, parson!' he cried with a laugh like a snarl, 'is that the way of it? Have you a sweet tooth too, like the rest of us?'

"I confess I almost lost my temper then; my grip tightened on my stick, but a missionary, Mr Beck, learns self-control.

"'She is coming,' I said, for I heard a distant step in the wood. He got up slowly and knocked the ashes from his pipe, rapping the edge viciously against the rough bark of the fallen tree. His face wore an ugly smile. I saw he had some plan in his mind—what it was I shall never know.

"A moment later I knew it was not Alice Dale's

step I heard. It was too heavy and too hasty. At the same moment I read in his eyes that the squire knew who was coming.

"Young Richard Ackland broke through the trees into the opening. He was in a furious rage, beside himself with passion, and glared at his uncle, who mocked him with a smile of utter contempt. I could see the young fellow was as mad as a dog that strains on his chain. He caught sight of me as I stood a few yards apart from the squire.

"'I'm very glad to see you here, Mr Greaves. I want a witness to all that passes between this man and myself. He has offered the vilest insults to Miss Dale. I cannot repeat what he has said to her.'

"'Don't worry, old chap,' chimed in the squire, 'parson knows.'

"'And he still associates with you?'

"'Well, I would not call it association exactly. He insisted on staying here in spite of me. He wanted to play the watch-dog to gentle Alice.'

"'You were here lying in wait for Miss Dale?'

"'A love tryst,' laughed the squire. 'Don't be so jealous, young man. Age before honesty—you know the proverb. Your turn may come afterwards.'

"At that Dare-Devil Dick whipped a revolver from his pocket. 'You're jesting with death,' he said. 'I mean to protect Alice Dale though it cost your life and mine. Give me your word you will never speak to her again.'

"The squire's mood changed instantly to black, bitter anger.

"'Drop that foolery,' he cried harshly; 'you ought to know the man you have to deal with. Put up that pistol and get out of my sight.'

"For answer Dick levelled the revolver. I stepped between the two men. They were not five paces apart. 'Put up the pistol, Dick,' I said, 'there is nothing to be gained by violence.' I came close to him to take the weapon from his hand.

"Under his breath he said: 'It is not loaded,' and louder, that the squire might hear, he ordered me to stand aside.

"I was fool enough to appeal to the squire. 'Let the girl alone,' I said, 'she is very young and innocent. Let her be.'

"He flamed into sudden anger. 'You whining sneak,' he cried, 'I believe you want the girl for yourself,' and he struck me with his open hand across the face.

"Dick spoke again. 'Your answer,' he shouted. 'Promise never to see the girl again, or take the consequences.'

"'You young fool,' growled the squire, fiercely, 'do you think I'm to be frightened by these schoolboy tricks!'

"Crack!

"The revolver shot rang out sharp and harsh through the silent woods. The squire clapped his hand to his side, reeled a little like a drunkard that tries to keep his balance, and fell. I had barely time to drop my stick, catch him in my arms, and so let him slide down to the sward, where he lay prone and still.

"Dick Ackland, with the revolver, from which

curled a ringlet of smoke, dangling loosely by his side, stood gazing with wild eyes—a very statue of bewilderment.

"'But the pistol was not loaded,' he muttered, speaking, it would seem, to himself more than to me; 'I took the bullet from the cartridge myself.'

"'It may be a fit of some kind,' I answered.

"'I will fetch a doctor.'

"Before he could move a foot there was a glimmer of colour on the shady path, and Alice Dale appeared. She stood still, her eyes questioning us; they seemed to search our hearts. When you have seen her you will understand.

"'I fear he is dead,' groaned poor Dick, constrained to answer her questioning eyes.

"'And you?'

"Then she saw the revolver lying in his hand and guessed. She gasped like one hurt to death. All the colour ebbed swiftly from her face; she swayed and fell forward in a dead faint, yet not so suddenly but Dick caught her in his arms.

"'Look to her, Dick,' I said. 'It is only a faint—the sudden shock; a little water from the brook will revive her. I will bring Dr Hampden. There is a short cut through the woods.'

"I don't think, Mr Beck, lame man ever covered rough ground quicker. I had to climb the demesne wall at the end of my run. You shall see the path presently if you care to."

"I would like to see the young lady first," said Mr Beck.

He had been poking about in the short, mossy turf like a golfer in search of a lost ball. It was an

instinct of Mr Beck's to poke about. The gleam of bright metal caught his eye. He picked up something and held it out for inspection to the vicar, who eyed it curiously.

"It looks like the lid of a small brass box," the vicar said tentatively.

It *was* like the lid of a very small circular brass box, of less diameter than a farthing, but much thicker, and fitted with a screw.

Mr Beck held it in the palm of his broad hand, turning it over and over inquisitively with a strong, thick forefinger, as if he questioned its use.

"I never saw a box so small," he said, "except a pasteboard pill-box. I wonder who had it here, and for what purpose?"

The question was addressed rather to himself than to the vicar. Anyway, the vicar made no answer.

Mr Beck dropped the little disc of brass into his waistcoat pocket.

"Shall we call on the young lady now," he said briskly, "and find what she has to say for herself?"

"She is at the school," answered the vicar. "She insisted on going on with her work, though she is terribly cut up by this tragedy, poor child!"

"Naturally," said Mr Beck. "Let us go to the school and see the young lady."

The walk led them through shady woodland ways to the school which Mr Beck had seen in the morning hard by the banks of a clear, swift-flowing stream. The birds piped in the overhanging boughs, the sunbeams danced on the ripples of the stream and made a shifting network of gold on the sandy bottom. There was a grim incongruity between the peaceful

rural scene and the tragedy they had come to investigate.

" If you will wait here," said the vicar, " I will call the girl to you. She can give the school in charge of her assistant for a few minutes."

Presently she came towards him where he stood at the fringe of the wood, a slim, girlish figure, bare-headed, and clad in a close-fitting black gown, with white at the neck and wrists. The sun was in her eyes, and she walked with downcast lids.

Mr Beck was surprised. It was the face of a schoolgirl, pretty, with the commonplace prettiness of soft brown hair and pink and white complexion; not in the least the girl he had expected to see; not in the least the girl he would have thought likely to kindle the flame of hot passion in the hearts of two such headstrong men as the vicar had described.

" This is Mr Beck," the vicar said, and she looked him straight in the eyes.

Then he understood. This was no ordinary woman. Never in his life had he seen such wonderful, such beautiful eyes. The colour was the pure, deep blue of the violet; the light was clear and bright as the sapphire. But violet or sapphire is trite, meaningless comparison. It was not the colour nor the light that made her eyes so wonderful. It was the life, the thought, the soul of a woman that shone through from their clear depths. Even the stolid Mr Beck lost his self-possession under her gaze.

The girl spoke first.

" It was very good of you to come," she said. " I hope you may be able to help the innocent. Richard Ackland is quite innocent."

"How do you know that?" Mr Beck asked.

Her eyes answered before she spoke.

"He told me so. Of course, I knew before he told me, but I was glad to have his word."

"Well," said Mr Beck, "we'll assume his innocence. That's all right for us, but, you see, we have got to prove it to others. I'll find that task easier when I know all the facts."

"Where shall I begin?"

"As near the beginning as you can, Miss Dale."

"A little while after I came here the elder Mr Ackland said things to me which—" the fair cheeks flushed, and the colour darkened in those wonderful blue eyes with anger or pain.

Mr Beck saw her trouble and briskly interposed: "Never mind about him—tell me about the younger man."

"Later," she said simply, "Richard asked me to be his wife. I refused him. I feared it would make trouble. But to-day, when I saw him in the police-station for a moment, I promised."

"If," began the vicar, fumblingly.

She caught his meaning in an instant.

"If he wins through this horrible trouble," she said quietly; "if not, I shall never marry."

All this was said very quietly, in a sweet, even voice. Only the girl's frank eyes told how intense was the pain she suffered.

"I don't want to worry you more than I can help," said Mr Beck, compassionately; "just a word as to what happened yesterday. You fainted, I believe, Miss Dale."

"Only for a second; I recovered instantly."

"You thought at first that Mr Richard Ackland had shot his uncle."

Hot anger kindled in the blue eyes.

"Never, never for a moment. How dare you say so! I was frightened, that was all. I saw a man lie bleeding—a wicked man, a man I hated, I won't deny it. But I was shocked all the same and wanted to save him. I had studied nursing before I came here and I thought he was still alive. I tried to bind up his wound; it looked no more than a pin prick, with one or two drops of blood oozing from it. I sent Mr Richard Ackland to fetch water. In the squire's coat pocket I found a revolver. I must have accidentally meddled with the trigger some way, for the thing went off."

"I forgot to say I heard the report when I was just climbing the demesne wall," said the vicar.

"The noise," the girl went on, "brought Richard running back to me. The squire was then quite dead, and we stayed together till the doctor came back with Mr Greaves. A short time afterwards the police appeared. That is all I know. Can you save him?" The blue eyes were full of a piteous entreaty.

"I hope so," Mr Beck answered a little huskily. Beauty in distress always moved him.

With a queer little, old-fashioned curtsey to the vicar and to the detective, but without a word more to either, the girl went back across the sunlit sward to her school.

"If you are not tired," said Mr Beck, "I would like to have a word with the police."

"I'm never tired," the vicar answered, "when

there is work to be done; and the police-station is only a quarter of a mile away."

Sergeant Coleman knew Mr Beck by name and reputation. He had a brother, he said, who had been in a case with Mr Beck, and he was as proud of it as Lord Dundreary was of the brother who played the German flute. He regarded the detective with the profound veneration of the small boy for the head of the school.

Mr Beck took the good man's manifest worship with modest unconcern. The corpse lay in the guard-room. A hard, handsome face—the face of one of the wicked old Roman Emperors carved in grey marble.

In another room the nephew, Richard Ackland, was held for the murder. Mr Beck managed to get an unobserved peep through the window. The young fellow sat bolt upright, with eyes half closed and the handsome face rigid.

"Looks like a caged hawk," was Mr Beck's comment as he moved away. "Always try to know what they look like, sergeant, before you jump to conclusions. It helps, believe me, it helps."

Mr Beck was very keen in his scrutiny of the two revolvers. Both were six-chambered. The one which was said to belong to the dead squire had four chambers loaded with ball cartridge. The nephew's weapon was loaded in five chambers, but the five bullets had been carefully extracted from the cartridges.

"You'll be wanting to see this, sir," said the sergeant. "It was that bit of lead that did the job." He handed him a little flattened fragment of lead.

"Must have gone clean through," the sergeant explained. "It fell out of his waistcoat when we undressed him."

Mr Beck took it in the palm of his broad hand.

"Got a scales, sergeant? A letter-scales will do." He weighed it to a hair. "Keep that carefully," he said, as he handed it back. "It will be useful at the trial."

"Have you found a clue, Mr Beck?" the vicar asked, as they strolled back to the vicarage.

"Too many, I'm afraid," said Mr Beck, dejectedly. "The case is getting confoundedly plain."

In the vicarage there was a revolver hanging to a nail in the hall.

"Loaded?" asked Mr Beck, pointing to the weapon.

"No," the vicar answered; "merely a scarecrow. It is half a year since I fired a shot out of it. It was a gift from young Richard Ackland."

Mr Beck took the pistol from the wall and examined it.

"It is one of a pair," he said; "the same maker and calibre, and takes the same cartridge. Could you get me a bullet of this pistol, Mr Greaves? I should like to weigh it."

For a moment the vicar looked startled and confused. He must have realised how deadly it would prove for Richard Ackland if the bullet of the pistol proved the same weight as the lead that killed the squire.

Mr Beck saw his hesitation—possibly he guessed the cause.

"The truth is the truth, anyway, and it must out," he said, "whoever brings it out."

"I will get you the bullet," said the vicar, and left the room.

In a moment or two he returned with a bullet between his fingers. Mr Beck weighed it carefully. It was the same weight as the morsel of lead he had weighed at the police-station.

"I'm afraid that settles it," muttered the detective; "the case has grown quite clear."

"I hope not, I sincerely hope not," cried the vicar.

"Well, we must all hope for the best," said Mr Beck, "but it is hard to hope strongly against strong proof."

He refused the vicar's pressing invitation to put up at the vicarage.

"There is a comfortable public-house, the sergeant tells me, in the village. My mind, such as it is, works best when I'm roughing it. Good-evening, sir. I hope to call to see you early to-morrow with some news."

Early next morning Mr Beck was on the scene of the murder—not the stolid Mr Beck of the day before, but active, eager, every sense keenly alert.

There was a curious suggestion about him of a well-trained setter dog when it is close upon the game—every nerve and muscle vibrant with suppressed excitement.

Like a setter he beat round the spot, searching the ground with his eyes. There had been much rain of late, and the ground was still soft enough to take and hold footprints. He found three or four prints, small and sharp, of the heel of a girl's shoe. He could even trace where Dick Ackland's foot had slipped and torn

the sod as he stopped and turned on his way to the brook when he heard the second revolver shot.

The vicar's footprints were faint and hard to follow (the lame foot lighter than the other) as he ran for the doctor. At first Mr Beck could only find a mere trace at intervals through the grass, but after a bit he reached the bottom of stiff clay that took the mould of the footprints like plaster of Paris.

Then suddenly he came upon something that surprised him. It was a slight protuberance in the clay, shaped somewhat like a button mushroom, a foot or so distant from the vicar's footprint.

Mr Beck dropped on his knees and whipped out the magnifying glass he always carried. He could just distinguish a faint, spiral line on the surface of the tiny thimble of clay.

Fumbling in his waistcoat pocket he got out the little brass lid he had found at the scene of the murder. It fitted the clay mushroom like a glove.

"I thought so," Mr Beck muttered, as he slipped the little brass lid back into his pocket; "that makes it quite certain." He followed the track carefully. The little round knob showed at intervals beside the footprints. Then it ceased.

Mr Beck's keen glance searched the ground on either side. To the right the woods opened to a clearing; to the left there was a sandy rabbit-warren rising in stunted hillocks. In front, not a hundred yards off, was the wall of the demesne. He had no trouble in satisfying himself that someone had recently scrambled over the wall—a stiff scramble for a lame man. The mortar had been stripped in several places by clinging feet and hands.

A moment's inspection satisfied Mr Beck there was no more to be learnt there. He followed the track no further, but went back to the rabbit-warren. Here on the dry, shifting sand the traces of recent feet were so slight as to be imperceptible to any eyes less keen than his own.

He poked about curiously amongst the burrows as if he were rabbit hunting, not crime hunting, and he even stretched his arm to the shoulder into two or three tortuous holes.

At last, apparently, he found what he sought in a rabbit hole near the top of a sandy hillock. Then he sat down, lit his pipe, and waited placidly.

The blue smoke curled softly up through the still air, the birds woke to song, and the peaceful rural scene, with its clumps of trees and wide stretches of lawn, and silver gleam of water in the distance, grew lovelier in the glowing sunlight, and still Mr Beck smoked and waited.

At last he caught sight of the unmistakable figure of the vicar limping swiftly over the ground, with his inevitable walking-cane in his hand.

Almost at the same moment the vicar caught sight of him as he sat conspicuous on the hillock, paused for the fraction of a second and then came on quickly as before.

"Good-morning, Mr Beck," he said genially, as he took a seat beside him. "You are very early abroad. Is it business or pleasure?"

"Both," said Mr Beck; "it is a lovely morning to get an appetite for breakfast."

"Have you come to the rabbits for counsel?"

queried the vicar, smilingly. "Found any clues in the rabbit holes?"

"Well, yes," answered Mr Beck, stolidly. "I found the last clue there, but I knew pretty well what I should find before I found it."

The vicar's face hardened for a second, as with a sudden spasm of pain or fear. But his voice was easy and careless as he said: "Tell me all about it. You know I'm deeply interested."

"I know that," said Mr Beck, simply. "It's a very interesting case." He took the little brass lid from his pocket. "It puzzled me a bit at first," he said, "though I ought to have guessed. This morning I found out what it is."

"And what is it?" asked the vicar.

"The ferrule of an air-gun," answered Mr Beck, gravely, and again the vicar's face hardened with pain or fear.

"Of course," Mr Beck went on, "I knew that it was not his nephew who shot the squire."

"How did you know it—when did you know it?"

"When I weighed the bit of lead that killed him. I knew the weight of the bullet that pattern of revolver would carry. It is my business to know. It was not the bullet of that revolver which killed the squire. When you brought me a bullet of the same weight as the lead and told me it was the bullet of your revolver you gave the show away. Then the idea of an air-gun flashed upon me, and I came out this morning to make sure."

"Well?" The word came with a kind of gasp from the vicar. "Did you make sure?"

Mr Beck answered slowly: "I made quite sure.

You see," he went on, "a man using the air-gun as a walking-cane with the ferrule off would leave little knobs on the clay. I found those little knobs and the little brass cap fitted them."

The vicar only nodded, but there was no fear in his face now.

"Vicar," said Mr Beck, with grave concern in his deep voice—almost with compassion—"you had your cane in your hand when you started to run for the doctor. You could not climb that wall with your cane in your hand and yet it found its way back to the vicarage. You can guess what that told me."

"There were two identical canes," said the vicar.

"And one of the two was an air-gun. It only remained to find out where you had hidden the air-gun before you climbed the wall. That was an easy task."

Mr Beck stooped over a rabbit hole beside him and drew out a walking-cane, in appearance identical with that which lay on the grass beside the vicar. But the second was of steel, and there was a little hole where the ferrule should have been.

The vicar never flinched. They were right who praised the courage of the man. His eyes were steady; there was no tremor in his voice.

"I'm glad I shot the brute," he said, "and I'm half glad you found me out; but I hope you will believe I had no notion of letting Dick Ackland suffer for it. As a last resource I would have surrendered. Still, I hoped to get him out of the country, and so give me a chance with Alice Dale, for I love Alice Dale."

"Mr. Beck stopped over a rabbit hole . . . and drew out a walking-cane."

face page 48.

The words were very quietly spoken, but the man's whole soul was in them. His voice shook with hopeless passion.

"I love Alice Dale," he repeated. "Now you will understand why I killed the scoundrel who insulted her. Perhaps you will even understand why I hoped that if young Ackland were out of the country I might have had a chance.

"The air-gun," he went on quietly, "was a gift of a dear friend when I was going to India. It is wonderfully powerful, and fires half a dozen bullets to a single pumping. I found it very useful more than once in India. The duplicate cane I bought in London when I returned, because it was so like the air-gun. I could hardly tell them apart, except by the weight. I had put the air-gun aside. No one in the vicarage knew anything of it.

"But I took it out of its hiding-place and carried it constantly since I heard of Squire Ackland's insult to Alice Dale. I had it with me loaded when I met him in the wood, and I quietly screwed off the ferrule, which slipped from my fingers into the thick grass. I almost hoped he would give me a chance to use the gun in self-defence. When Dick Ackland fired the blank cartridge I saw my chance and took it. I was standing close to the squire at the time. I turned the point of the air-gun to his side, pressed the little knob with my thumb, like this:—"

With a quick movement he snatched the air-gun from where it lay across the detective's knees, and turned the nozzle to his side. There was a sharp, metallic twang as the release of the tightly-packed

air drove the bullet home. The man toppled over, and the gun went clattering down the hillock.

The spasm of the parting soul distorted the vicar's face with sudden agony. Then a smile settled on the dead face, and he lay limp and still, staring with sightless eyes at the blue sky. Human justice had no further claim on him.

III

DROWNED DIAMONDS

Mr Paul Beck went to Eagleton on business. He stayed for pleasure.

He was sent down to secure evidence against a young bank clerk suspected of serious defalcations. The result of his investigations was to send to penal servitude a highly-respectable bank manager who had ingeniously endeavoured to shift his own guilt on to the shoulders of a subordinate.

The amount at stake was very large and the fee substantial. The job had only taken four days, and Mr Beck, who had nothing pressing on his hands, stayed on at the Rockwell Hotel, Eagleton. The place has so recently and so suddenly grown into public favour that it is hardly necessary to mention that Eagleton has been always one of the most beautiful, as it is now one of the most popular, watering-places in the three kingdoms. The town stands on a gentle slope, backed by a circle of high hills and fronted by a beautiful bay.

Doubtless the building of Rockwell Hotel largely helped to make Eagleton fashionable. At one corner of the bay a broad flat tableland, level as a billiard-table, runs out into the water. A foot under the soil is solid rock which meets the

sea in a sheer wall fifty feet high. Of this wall twenty feet are over the water, and thirty feet under it.

Right at the edge the great hotel is built. The terrace at the back of the hotel looks not merely over the sea, but down into it. The boats are moored under the hotel windows, and spring-boards for bathers strike out from the railings of the terrace. It reminds one of Venice, with this difference, that instead of a dark, muddy canal there is a wide expanse of clear, blue water hedged in by the everlasting hills. No wonder the Rockwell Hotel made Eagleton popular.

Yet it was not the beauties of Nature—at least the inanimate beauties—that kept Mr Beck in the place after his work was over.

No doubt it suited him. There was a fine golf links at the further end of the town where the land begins to slope up from the sea. The sea-fishing was excellent, and Mr Beck, as we know, loved fishing of all kinds. A tiny motor launch—light and swift as a bird—whisked him over the bay to the spot, near or far, where fish were plentiful and hungry. These were potent inducements, no doubt, but there was still "metal more attractive."

The main inducement that held him in Eagleton was the charming companionship of Miss Alice Rosedale, the American heiress, who was staying with her father, Joshua Rosedale, at the Rockwell Hotel. Mr Beck liked girls—especially when they were so young and pretty as Miss Alice Rosedale. This stout, middle-aged detective was as devoted to the service of the sex as a knight-errant of old,

and as ready when the chance offered to do them a service.

Let it be said the feeling was reciprocal. All the girls were fond of Mr Beck and treated him with an affectionate freedom and familiarity that made the young men grind their teeth with envy.

Miss Alice Rosedale publicly declared she was in love with him, and she was ready at any time to throw over any of her young admirers for a round of golf with Mr Beck, or a run over the bay in his motor-boat.

Yet, strange to say, her two chief admirers, though hating each other cordially, were both the very best friends with Mr Beck; moreover, her father had taken a special fancy to the good-humoured, good-natured detective.

"May I come?" he said one morning as Mr Beck went down the iron ladder from the hotel terrace to his motor-boat. "There is something particular I want to say to you."

"Of course," said Mr Beck, as he slipped the rope from the ring.

Mr Rosedale sat in the stern, smoking a huge cigar, while the boat slid out over the still blue waters of the bay—swift, smooth and noiseless as a skater on ice.

Plainly Mr Rosedale had a difficulty about that something particular he wanted to say to Mr Beck.

He began awkwardly enough at last. "It is only this morning," he said, "I heard you were the detective who got the young fellow out of his trouble and brought the real criminal to book. All the town was talking about the business, but no one knew you

had a hand in it. I saw the new bank manager yesterday. I had a pretty big lodgment to make, and he told me the whole story in confidence. 'Gad! it was the smartest thing I ever heard."

There was no false modesty about Mr Beck. He beamed at the other's praise.

"Luck helped me as usual," he said, "but you'll keep the story to yourself—won't you? I'm having a real good time down here, which might be spoilt if people knew who I was."

"Oh, that's all right! I'm close as a clam. But I thought, perhaps, you might do me a trick of your trade while you are here. Now keep your hair on, at anyrate till you've heard what I've got to say. I'm a rough sort of chap, and I've made my own pile. I've been in everything but gold mines, and I haven't missed that much, for pretty near everything I touched turned to gold. Live meat, dead meat, wheat and oil—I've had a go at everything that had a dollar in it, and I've nearly always been lucky enough to get in on the ground floor and come out at the top."

"There's nothing like luck," Mr Beck agreed sententiously.

"Well, my biggest bit of luck is Alice."

"That's so," assented Mr Beck, with emphasis.

"Alice gets what she wants," said her father.

"So I should imagine."

"Have you seen her necklace? No! Well, I'll get her to wear it to-night. I tell you it's fine. The middle diamond I picked up from a Kaffir at the Cape. I didn't ask where he found it. I've made many a good bargain in my day, but that was

about the best. There's close on half a million dollars squeezed tight in that bit of glass. The other stones aren't bad—the smallest cost more than the big one. You can't match that necklace in America, and you can't match the girl in the world. Now I want you to keep an eye on both for me. See! "

Mr Beck was jointing his rod, and they were near the centre of the bay—sea, lake or river, he always fished with a rod.

" From what I have seen of Miss Alice," he said, " she is pretty well able to take care of her necklace and of herself."

" She's spry—that's so, she's spry, but girls and jewels tempt thieves. There have been three tries for the necklace, and it was nearly gone once. You know Jim Morgan? "

" He's no thief," interposed Mr Beck, bluntly. " He's a man if I know a man."

" In a way you're right—in a way you're wrong. He doesn't want the diamonds, but he's got a hankering after my girl. He'd steal her if he got half a chance."

" I don't blame him."

" Nor I, but I'll stop him. Jim is right enough. His father and I were pards once. Jim has made his pile on a cattle ranch. He can shoot and ride some, and he is very welcome to any girl in America except mine."

" And why not yours? "

Mr Beck had hooked a heavy fish and was playing him on his light rod while he listened and answered. The struggling, splashing fish and the imperturbable angler were curiously suggestive of the man's method.

"Why not yours?" he repeated, winding up his line, for Mr Rosedale had come to a halt.

"Well, it's this way," he blundered out at last shamefacedly, "Jim is a good chap. I'm not denying it—and he and Alice ran together when they were children. But I promised my old woman when she was leaving that I'd marry the girl to a lord, and I don't want to go back on my word. She's good enough for any lord."

"Too good."

"Well, a lord it is to be. I'd sooner have a French lord than a Britisher. Britishers are getting too common. What do you think of the Count Victor D'Armaund? He's spry!"

"Very spry," Mr Beck assented drily, as he brought the meek, exhausted fish to the boat's edge, and with a dexterous dip of the gaff flicked him on board.

"He's got five chateaux and a forest in France," said the millionaire; "he told me so, and his title comes down from the Crusaders. Of course I took his word for it, but business is business, and I've sent a man special to France to make sure. Alice seems to cotton to him; if the title, etc., are O.K., he might do."

"Yes," assented Mr Beck, drily as before, "he might—do." The last word came out by itself as he unhooked his fish, and with a quick jerk of his wrist swished the shiny bait back into the sea.

"But where do I come in?" he asked mildly, when Mr Rosedale again came to a halt.

"Well, I thought you might just keep a look round promiscuous-like, in case anything should

happen. As to fee, just name it. I'll write the cheque when we go back; you put the figure in yourself."

Mr Beck took him up short. "Let us leave the cheque-book out of the question," he said. "I'm here for amusement, not money. I'm a rich man too, Mr Rosedale, I may say a very rich man. I have been lucky enough to be of service to people who have lots of money, people like yourself who were rich and over-generous, and they have given me a fair share of the spoil. I have made my own hits on the Stock Exchange as well. I've more money than I shall ever know what to do with."

"Then why—?" Mr Rosedale began.

"Why am I a detective you want to know? Because I like the work. Why does a dog set game? Instinct, I suppose. But it isn't altogether instinct with me. I have managed to help at least as many as I have hurt, and as I help the good and hurt the bad I feel I am a kind of Providence in a small way of business. Miss Alice and I are very good friends, and I should be glad, if you like, to keep an eye on her and her diamonds."

"Shake!" said Mr Rosedale. "I'll take you at your word. It's a load off my mind to know you are hanging round."

That evening there was a dance at the hotel, and Mr Beck, with his back to the wall, looked on benevolently while Miss Alice danced with the French count. A handsome man was the Count—tall and graceful, and swarthy, even for a Frenchman, with an abundant crop of shiny black hair, curly and silky as a water spaniel's. Strangely enough his eyes were

steel blue, and gave a special character to his otherwise somewhat commonplace good looks. Most men looked twice at Count Victor D'Armaund, and most women oftener, to the danger of their peace of mind.

He " waltzed divinely," and the eyes of Miss Alice, as they swung and whirled to the languorous strain of the music, beamed with the girl's delight in a jolly dance and a perfect partner. Her dress was of fluffy silk, with a pretty rosebud pattern, and round her slim, white throat were the diamonds. It was a collar of gems rather than a necklace, with the famous Rosedale diamond blazing in the centre under the pert dimple of her chin.

She caught sight of Mr Beck by the wall, and flung him a saucy smile as she swept past. But there was no smile for the young fellow who stood beside Mr Beck—Yankee writ plain in his tall, lank, strong figure and keen face with deep-set eyes that glowered at the Count.

" Pop told me you wanted to see the diamonds," Alice said as she walked past after the dance, leaning lightly on her partner's arm. " Catch! "

She undid the collar of diamonds from her neck and tossed it—a flash of white light under the electric lamps—to Mr Beck.

He caught it lightly in a big, brown hand, and followed her to the door of the ballroom.

" I will sit out the next dance after supper with you," said Miss Alice, generously. " Pop tells me you are a judge of diamonds. I want to know what you think of mine."

Mr Beck got to a quiet corner under a lamp and

peered closely at the jewels that lay—a little pool of limpid light—in his hollow palm, while his practised eyes appraised their value. The huge Rosedale diamond seemed to hold a fire imprisoned in its heart which broke forth in streams of coloured sparks through every facet.

"I wonder what your history will be," he said gravely, "when you are a hundred years over ground. Will you have the same grim story as the other big diamonds to tell of trickery, cheating, robbery and murder? Mr Rosedale is right; these gems will take some looking after. Well, I'll do my best while I'm here — I can do no more."

Miss Alice found him in his quiet corner, his eyes still on the gems.

"Ours, I think," she said, with a demure little curtsey, and with her hand on his arm stepped daintily across the room to the passage that led to the terrace by the sea.

"We will be quite comfy here," she said, as she nestled down amid a pile of silk cushions in a big wicker chair. "I sent Jim for the cushions," she added wickedly; "he doesn't mind you. But when I told him at first I was going to sit out with the Count he gave me a look like a bowie-knife."

"Why do you worry him?" asked Mr Beck.

"What do you think of my big diamond?" replied Miss Alice.

"It's one of the finest I have ever seen. I believe it is one of the twelve best in the world."

She clapped her hands in childish glee.

"I'm so glad! I couldn't quite trust Pop; he so cracks up all that belongs to himself, daughter included. You're sure?"

"Quite."

"Well, you shall put it on for telling me. There!"

With big, strong fingers, that were wonderfully light in their touch, Mr Beck fastened the glittering collar round the fair neck, and the thought came to him that Mr Rosedale was right again—the daughter, too, would take some watching.

She was bewitchingly lovely in the moonlight, with that magic circle of coloured light at her white throat. Dainty and fragile she looked as a figure of Dresden china, but he knew what a wonderful reserve of strength was in that slight, girlish figure, where every muscle was of fine steel. He knew, too, that the dainty little lady had a mind and a will of her own.

"Now what about these two men?" said Mr Beck, coming, with quiet persistence, back to the topic she had evaded.

"I do my best," she said, with an unctuous upturning of the bright brown eyes, brimful and running over with mischievous light. "I divide my time fairly between the two. I row and swim with Jim, and I play tennis and dance with the Count. The Count doesn't swim or row, and Jim doesn't play tennis or dance, so it's a sort of fair divide. I'm sure neither of them grudges you your golf."

"My good little girl," said Mr Beck, "you don't want me to tell you that you can only make one man

in the world happy, though you can make as many as you choose miserable? You cannot marry both Jim and the Count—not in this country, anyway."

She bubbled over with delicious laughter.

"Oh, you dear old Mrs Grundy! I see dad has been talking to you of the daughter as well as of the diamonds. He wants me to throw Jim over and marry the Count. Now doesn't he?"

Mr Beck nodded.

"Can you keep a secret?"

He nodded again.

"Well, I can't marry the Count because he's married already, and two wives are no more allowed than two husbands in this country. The Count told me himself the very first day. Perhaps he was afraid I'd fall in love with him and break my innocent little heart. Anyway he told me, and I begged him not to tell anyone else. That's where the fun comes in, you see. Pop is delighted and Jim is distracted, and I have my amusement for nothing."

"And when you are tired of your sport?" ventured Mr Beck.

"When I am I'll tell you, but that's not yet. Now take me back. I have promised the next waltz to the Count, and I just love to see Jim glowering."

She told the Count what Mr Beck had said about the diamonds, and the Count was much impressed. It seems that he also had some knowledge of precious stones.

"But you can never judge fairly by artificial

light," he said; "it needs clear daylight to make sure."

"I will bring them down with me to breakfast to-morrow," interposed Alice—"I will be breakfasting at eleven. And you?"

"The same hour," gravely responded the Count.

"What a curious coincidence," said the girl, innocently. "Then we shall meet at breakfast most likely."

Later in the night the girl and the Count had paused by the open window, after a long waltz which they had danced through from the first note to the last. The room was hot and the crowd great. Alice Rosedale was cool, fresh and dainty as a newly-plucked flower. Nothing tired her—nothing heated her. But the Count breathed quickly, and was flushed with exercise, and his gloves clung to his fingers as he took them off slowly.

"Tired out, Count?" said the smiling Mr Beck, pausing on his way to the door.

The Frenchman put the suggestion aside with a scornful little shrug.

"One is never tired in heaven," he said with his quaint French accent.

"I suppose I'm getting too old for heaven," Mr Beck rejoined placidly. "Good-night, Miss Rosedale; good-night, Count."

Contrary to custom, he shook the Count heartily by the hand as they parted.

When he got to his own room Mr Beck noticed several faint, greyish stains on the pure, smooth white of his right-hand glove. He examined them

with a magnifying-glass, and then put the glove carefully aside.

The Count and Miss Rosedale met as she had prophesied at breakfast in the open air on the terrace looking over the tranquil sea just touched into sparkling ripples by the morning breeze.

A dainty breakfast tempted appetites that needed no tempting, and the beautiful surroundings heightened their enjoyment of the meal.

"May I have the felicity?" the Count asked, when they moved to a broad bench closer to the sea. He held his gold cigarette-case open.

It was characteristic of the man and his gallantry that the cigarettes had a faint odour of violets. They were specially designed for ladies' smoking.

The girl nestled more cosily amongst her cushions and looked out over the glorious view. The broad floor of blue water was circled by a range of hills whose peaks and curves stood in sharp outline against the sky. A fresh breeze was on the wing, and little waves, white-edged with foam, raced shorewards.

A white-sailed yacht a hundred yards from where they sat gave brightness and life to the picture. The crew were busy aboard, apparently hoisting sail and weighing anchor for a cruise.

To the right Mr Beck in his motor-boat was moving slowly with a fishing-rod arched over the bow and a line trailing through the sparkling water.

A softer light dawned in the girl's eyes as she looked out over the sea, wholly oblivious of the handsome Frenchman at her side.

"You have forgotten the diamonds," he said tentatively; "is it not so? Young ladies forget—yes."

She woke up suddenly at the sound of his smooth voice.

"Wrong," she said sharply; "women never forget when they want to remember. I have brought you the diamonds."

She drew the case from a flimsy little bag of brocaded silk where she kept her handkerchief and purse, and handed it to him carelessly.

He took it as carelessly, but she noticed at the time that his hand trembled as he took it and his face paled. Perhaps he had some presentiment of what was to follow.

When he opened the case a cry of delight escaped him. The diamonds were one blaze of dazzling, many-coloured light in the sunshine. The Count examined them carefully. "They are priceless!" he murmured. "Priceless! Matchless! May I be permitted? In your dark hair they would superbly show."

But as he took a hasty step forward to where she sat his foot caught in the edge of the rug and a stumble shot him against the railing that, waist high, guarded the terrace. His feet went up and his head down as he struck, and he was flung in an awkward heap over the railing into the sea. The diamonds left his hand as he fell and shot in front—a curved streak of light.

A frightened scream broke from the girl's lips. She was on her feet in a moment, at the edge of the terrace, with eager eyes on the tossing water. Like a

"The diamonds left his hand as he fell, and shot in front—a curved streak of light."

To face page 64.