The HEAVEN-KISSED HILL

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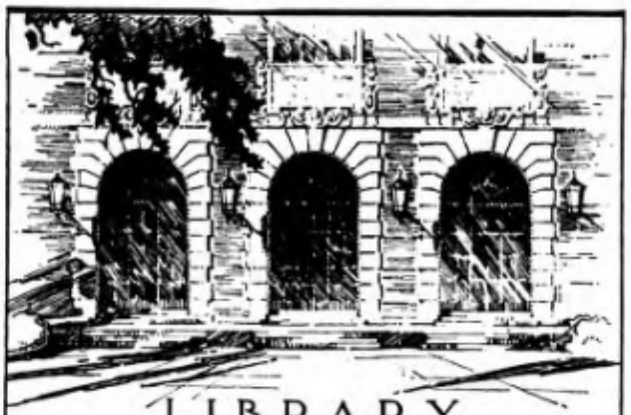

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BY

J. S. FLETCHER

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THE COPPER BOX, RAVENSDENE COURT,
THE ORANGE YELLOW DIAMOND, ETC.

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CHAPTER I

The Cottage in the Quarry

THE actualities of this amazing adventure began one May evening, whereon my friend Colstervine walked into our flat in Maida Vale and told us that his partner was dead. Colstervine is a stockbroker who looks as if he had spent all his life in hunting big game. A great all-bone-muscle-and-sinew sort of a man, six feet in his stockings, and as tough as hickory; his partner, Chisholm, was a little, plethoric person, and it didn't surprise me to hear that the end of him had come through apoplexy, and with startling suddenness.

"But that's upset all my plans," continued Colstervine, when he had got through his first announcement. "You see, I was going off

to-morrow to my little place on the South Downs. All arrangements made, all my grub, and so on, in the place; bed aired, nothing to do but walk in. And now, of course, I can't go. Tied down here tight for a couple of months, anyhow."

Only those who knew Colstervine would have realised exactly what this meant. Colstervine is one of those men who have a passionate love of what we will call tent life. The place of which he spoke was well known to all his friends, though only by repute—some utterly out-of-the-way ramshackle cottage or other that he had discovered and fitted up in the wilds, and to which he made periodical retreats, living there a Robinson Crusoe life, but without even a dog or a parrot to bear him company. Yet, things being as they were, there was nothing to say. But Colstervine said something, turning to my wife, as if she—a two months' bride—were already the better horse.

"Look here, Mrs. Cresswell," he said, "why shouldn't you and Dick go down there? What's to stop you? You've nothing to do but give your maid a holiday and lock up your flat.

As I say, everything's in the cottage already—larder filled with all manner of grub, chiefly in tins, drinks in the cupboard—here's the key: all arrangements made with the old woman—name of Squeech, and lives two miles off—who comes to clean up, and who's expecting me to-morrow afternoon. Nothing whatever to do but walk in, hang up your hats, make yourselves at home, and be as happy as the birds about you. Go!"

Marjorie looked at me; already I saw the spirit of adventure in her eyes. But I affected to look at nothing but Colstervine.

"My dear fellow!" I said. "We've only just got back from a somewhat lengthy and far-flung honeymoon!"

Colstervine has a way of dealing bigly and rapidly with things. He waved one of his great hands with a gesture suggestive of flinging bundles of scrip about.

"Pooh!" he retorted. "Go and have another! Lay you a fiver to a farthing you never saw such a spot in your first one as this little paradise of mine is! I was so looking forward to getting to it to-morrow! In this weather—ah!"

"Is it so very charming, Mr. Colstervine?" asked Marjorie.

"Charming?" Colstervine spread out his hands like a Frenchman and grew eloquent. "No other place in all England like it! Luckiest day I ever had in my life when I struck it—by pure accident, too. Picturesque old cottage, mostly wood, overgrown with roses and things, in a queer, worked-out old quarry, top of a high hill—a heaven-kissed hill, to vary Shakespeare by a termination. Ambrosial air, view of about a few thousand square miles, more or less, over land and sea—and absolute, total, utter solitude! Solitude such as—oh, well, I reckon that if you once get there you'll never want to go away."

"Where is this crystallisation of all that's perfect, Colstervine?" I inquired. "Is it easily approachable?"

Colstervine became intensely practical.

"Tell you how to go straight there, and how to be there within half a day, without fuss or hurry," he answered. "Take a taxi to Victoria. Get the ten-ten to Wrychester—lovely old spot, that. Get another taxi there—plenty at the station. Tell the man to drive you to

Woke Cross Roads. Get out. Look round. You'll see, north of you, a high curving hill, and, a little to your north-east, on the highest part of the hill, a round coppice or wood—Woke Clump. Make for it, on foot, lanes, footpaths, open hillside, two miles' stiff walking. Then——"

"Look here, Colstervine," I broke in, "you'd have to show me all that on a map. Not this instant," I added hastily, as he tore from his pocket a well-thumbed ordnance survey sheet, and thrust it at me. "There's a question before that. What about luggage? Evidently this is not the place you can run wheels right up to——"

"Luggage, eh?" he remarked, with a glance at Marjorie. "Hm, luggage, now? You see, I never take any that I can't carry myself. Rough suit of clothes, flannel shirt, necessaries, you know——"

"Women never travel without luggage, Colstervine," I said severely. "How could one get, say, a good-sized, old-fashioned portmanteau to this oasis? For I gather that while train and taxi can carry us over the principal stages of the journey, the last one is——"

"It can be done, it can be done!" declared Colstervine, suddenly. "At Woke Cross Roads there is an old chap who owns a stout donkey. A portmanteau, oh, yes! Never did that myself, I carry all I want in a knapsack, on my shoulders. But it can be done. And now listen."

At the end of ten minutes Colstervine had solved all difficulties, and given us every necessary working particular. I began to rub my chin. For all along, I had seen that Marjorie was already wild to be setting out on this suddenly-suggested expedition.

"Hm!" I said. "You have a princely way with you, Colstervine. And, as you say, we've nothing to do but give the damsel a holiday and lock up the flat. To-day is Thursday. I daresay I could plunge into solitude for—at least a week-end."

Colstervine pulled a key out of his pocket and thrust it into my right hand.

"Cupboard in parlour—specially patent lock," he said. "Carefully selected, small—yet ample—stock of sound wines, old whisky, all and everything. I'll drop old woman Squeech a wire, saying she's to expect you two

instead of me to-morrow afternoon, and bidding her serve you well. And I guess that when you get there you'll stop a week, and weep when you quit. I always do! Blessings!"

Then, as suddenly as he had come, Colstervine was gone, and dangling the key of his cupboard on my finger, I looked at Marjorie.

"Did I really say we would go?" I inquired, weakly.

"Of course you did!" she answered peremptorily. "And we are going, I'm dying to go. And I'm going to pack precisely what we shall need for such an outing, just now."

"Don't forget," said I, "that it will have to be borne, finally, by a donkey. I am not quite sure of what burden a donkey is capable——"

But she made the obvious retort, and retired into her chamber, and I, spreading out Colstervine's ordnance survey sheet, proceeded to make myself acquainted, as well as I could, with the geography of the district into which we were being driven. Half-an-hour's study of the subject, the sheet being supplemented by reference to my own resources in the way of maps and gazetteers, convinced me that Col-

stervine's cottage was as near an approach to a desert island as modern humanity could find. It was near nowhere, and for my part, I began to put together a bundle of books, a pack or two of cards, and enough tobacco to last a moderate man for at least a week. In the midst of this, Colstervine, from his club, rang me up on the telephone.

"I say!" he said, when I had let him know that I was all ears. "Just struck me—if you do find it pretty lonely there—and there isn't a soul to speak to, close by, anyhow—there's an awfully interesting chap on the other side—top side, you know—of the hill. A Scotsman—Macpherson. About twice my size. Recently come down there as a sheep-farmer. Delightful person. Ideal. Worth cultivating. Thickest brogue—or whatever you call it—you ever heard in your life. Takes you about an hour to get into it—but quite paying if you're patient. Go see him. Most hospitable man. Got all that?"

"Every word!" I answered. "It may be the saving of us. I say!"

"Well?" inquired Colstervine.

"Is this shanty of yours burglar-proof—and that sort of thing?" I asked.

"Had new doors and windows put in when I bought it," he replied. "Splendid locks, and so on. Tell the missis she can rest in absolute safety. Stand a siege, that place. I say, Dick —one thing—I'd better tell you. That old Squeech woman says the spot is haunted—don't let her frighten you. Eh?"

"The place is now more highly recommended than before," I said. "Good-bye, Colstervine." I turned to Marjorie, who just then appeared at my elbow. "Colstervine," I remarked, "has just rung me up to tell me of the additional delights in his Paradise. Our only neighbour is a Scotsman twice as big as Colstervine himself, and the cottage is haunted. You'd better think."

"Can't think and pack," she retorted. "Give me anything that you want putting into the portmanteau. And let's see—didn't he say the ten-ten at Victoria? Then we must have breakfast at eight-thirty, sharp. I suppose we shall lunch at Wrychester?"

We did lunch at Wrychester next day—very peacefully and comfortably, in the shadow of

the old and grey cathedral; the hour that we spent over that lunch was almost the last serene sixty minutes that we were to know for the next two days. Up to then our adventure had been uneventful—the journey from London—the glance around the old cathedral city—the quiet lunch—all this was ordinary. But if we had known what lay before us, when, lunch being over, we got ourselves and our portmanteau into an old-fashioned fly—infinitely preferable to a taxi-cab—and ordered its driver to take us to Woke Cross Roads, we should most certainly have remained in the old-world hotel which we were quitting—and been thankful for its security and shelter.

It was a perfect spring afternoon, and the drive, away into hills, was delightful. To us it was all new country; neither of us had ever been in that corner of England before, and although we were almost fresh from much travelling in other parts we were both keenly alive to the new impressions. Each successive village and hamlet was a revelation, but I was quick to note that within an hour of leaving Wrychester we had left hamlets and villages behind, and were getting into what appeared

to be an unusually lonely, unpopulated region. One looked round in vain for church spire or tower, or the high gables of big houses; an isolated farmstead, here and there, or a cottage by the wayside, was all the sign of human habitation that we saw. And finally, after a somewhat lengthy spell in a woodland road, from the depths of which we could see nothing at all, our driver turned a corner, pulled up by a group of two or three cottages, set in trim little gardens, and announced that we had reached Woke Cross Roads. We saw Colstervine's heaven-kissed hill then; it rose right before us, like a great rampart, curving away from west to north-east, and shutting out all the land behind; also we saw his landmark of trees, Woke Clump. It looked . . . far off.

When the fly and its driver had gone slowly away, our next job was to find the old chap who owned the stout donkey. We found him—in one of the cottages. To our infinite joy he not only knew where Colstervine's hermitage was, but engaged to bring up all our impedimenta of portmanteau, small bags, and coats there and then. And he showed us where to go.

"You keeps that there clump o' trees on top

o' the hill ever before you," says he, illustrating his precepts with an ash plant. "Make for that by this here lane and across the fields and over the hillside: don't let he ever 'scape ye—so long as he be a-loomin' up there, top of hill, you be right. And when you come to he do ye work round to the far side till you comes out top of everything and there you do see old quarry hole, and in there be Mister Colstervine's cottage, and a very nice place he make of that, sure-ly, and I be up there as fast as my old ass stir his stumps."

"How far do you call it?" asked Marjorie.

"Oh, dunno, missie," he answered, with true rustic indifference to distance. "Med be two, or med be three mile—dunno 'zactly. 'Bout a nice walk."

We went off by a lane that climbed and wound. It was not a straight lane, nor a well-floored one. Sometimes it seemed to turn round on itself, sometimes it fell away into hollows, now and then it led us to brooks which we had to cross by stepping-stones. But somehow or other it led us up that long rampart of hill, and when at last, after crossing some fields, we came out on the open hillside with the land-

mark-clump only a mile or so in front, we found that we were already at a considerable altitude, and that far away to the south lay a great expanse of shining sea, and that east and west we could see for what Marjorie called hundreds of miles. The view, indeed, was glorious, and we both looked at each other.

"Dick!" said Marjorie. "We're going to enjoy this. Colstervine's a brick for thinking of it. What views! And—what air!"

"Air!" said I. "Um!—I should say that if we're going to breathe this all day we shall be hard and fast asleep by eight o'clock every night. This hill-top air is positively intoxicating. And we aren't at the top yet."

"There's the clump, anyhow," she answered, "and the cottage is close by."

We made on to the clump of trees—a great group of ash, elm, and beech—growing in a ring; and restraining a natural desire to linger there for the sake of the view, which, in truth, seemed to embrace half the southern counties, pressed forward to find Colstervine's beloved retreat. Within ten minutes we were looking down upon it, and since all this is about it, it will be well if some account of its situation is

here given. Near the top of the hill, where a sort of bluff rose out of the smoother outlines, there had been once upon a time a quarry, or, as I should have called it, a chalk-pit, the workings of which had evidently been considerable. But it had long fallen into disuse and its wide floor-space was thickly covered with vegetation and bramble and gorse; its deep, scarped sides were clothed with trees and shrub; it was now simply a big, square, cavernous hole in the hillside, entered by a natural gateway, a species of long, deep, roofless tunnel, in front of which lay a coppice of pine. And in the very centre of this curious excavation stood a cottage—Colstervine's cottage—half wood, half stone, and almost entirely embowered in ivy and climbing roses. There was a woman standing at its open door, and when she caught sight of us she retreated inside. From the fact that the thin column of smoke rising from the chimney became accelerated in volume immediately afterwards, I concluded that she was Mrs. Squeech, and that on seeing us she had at once mended the fire and put on the kettle.

Mrs. Squeech, on nearer acquaintance, turned out to be one of those women who are

given to curtsying. She had reddish hair, a decided squint, and a bashful manner. But she was refreshingly clean, and her apron was spotless; moreover, she had tea—Colstervine's best china—all ready for us. And when that was duly honoured, she told us all about her domestic arrangements—that is, with respect to the cottage. It turned out that she herself lived in a village two miles away, at the foot of the hill, therefore, she only came up to do for Mr. Colstervine every other day.

"Which on them days, ma'am," said Mrs. Squeech, "I bring up fresh bread, and also a can of new milk. On other days, Mr. Colstervine, he make Swiss milk do."

She looked at us doubtfully, as if wondering whether our tastes corresponded with those of our host. But I could see that Mrs. Squeech didn't hold with Swiss milk.

"What Mr. Colstervine does, we shall do," declared Marjorie, with a severity that would have done credit to a middle-aged matron. "Now, about all other arrangements, Mrs. Squeech? As you only come every other day, and this is Friday, I suppose you won't come again till Sunday?"

"Sunday morning, nine o'clock, ma'am," replied Mrs. Squeech. "Which, if you care for a hot joint, ma'am, on that day, I could bring up a nice bit of sirloin or a small shoulder o' mutton, or a little leg o' lamb, ma'am."

"What does Mr. Colstervine do?" asked Marjorie.

Mrs. Squeech's unimpaired eye turned in the direction of the well-stored larder.

"Mr. Colstervine, ma'am, is a powerful one for they cold things," she said, with a sniff. "He've enough o' tongues and such like in there to feed a regiment! But of course——"

I left Mrs. Squeech and Marjorie to settle these wholly unimportant details, and took a look round the cottage. Clearly, when Colstervine bought it, he had spent a lot of money on it. All the doors and windows were new, strong, substantial; every window in the place was fitted with strong inner shutters. All the rooms were fittingly and well furnished with fine old stuff that he had doubtless picked up in the Wrychester antique furniture shops. It was an ideal spot for a week-end cottage, and an ideal cottage, and the silence that wrapped it round could almost be felt.

We began to feel it—literally—when Mrs. Squeech had departed, and the old man and his donkey had come and gone. Then, at last, we were really alone; as much alone, I think it seemed to both of us, as if we had suddenly been set down on some atoll in the far Pacific. We were neither of us used to loneliness, nor to solitudes such as this, and though we said nothing, each—as mutual confession later on proved—felt that the world was a long way off, and I am not sure that we did not already throw wistful thoughts in the direction of the sleepy streets of Wrychester, seven miles away.

But there were things to do—compensations, and amusing ones. We thoroughly examined the cottage and all its contents. Colstervine had truly said that his larder was well stocked; he himself was a great trencherman, and there was every delicacy there—in tins and jars and pots—that man could think of, from caviare to anchovies. The cupboard in the parlour was similarly equipped—Colstervine had a fine taste in wines. It amused us to get ready our own supper, and to wash up the china and silver; this was playing at keeping house in real fashion. And by the time that was over

the dusk was changing to darkness; we went outside the cottage as the night fell, and hung over its little fence, listening. There was not a breath of air to move the feathery pines; in all that vast expanse around us not a sound.

"Colstervine was right!" I said suddenly. "This is solitude!"

At ten o'clock Marjorie yawned and went promptly to bed. I mixed a glass of our host's old whisky, and lighted a last pipe. And perhaps ten minutes later, as I was glancing over Colstervine's shelf of books, I started—cursing myself as I did so for yielding to—I didn't know what. I had fancied—mere fancy, I believed—that I had heard a stealthy, cat-like footstep . . . somewhere outside. Foolish! . . . yet . . .

The next instant there came a low, gentle, but unmistakable tapping at the cottage door.

CHAPTER II

The Grizzled Man

HAD this cottage of Colstervine's been anywhere else than where it was, there would have been nothing remarkable in the fact that somebody came knocking at its door at ten o'clock in the evening. But its situation was unusual. Mrs. Squeech had told us that her village was two miles away, at the foot of the hill, and had gratuitously added the information that her own abode—if we happened to want her, sudden like—was the first house in the village . . . and the nearest house to ours on any side of our own peculiar location. Thinking it well to know exactly how we stood in these particulars, I had asked Mrs. Squeech where Mr. Macpherson's farm was: after long cogitation, Mrs. Squeech had decided that Mr. Macpherson must be that Scotch gentleman what had came to those parts, recent: according to her, his farm was a good bit off, but whether three miles or four she was uncertain.

Putting everything together, the plain facts of the case were that there was not a human habitation anywhere near us, nor a road that led from one place to another. Who, then, could it be who came knocking at the cottage door at that late hour?

But I had no hesitation in going straight out to the door: I made for it, indeed, before the low, gentle tapping had ceased. And here, let me exactly explain the geography of the ground floor of Colstervine's cottage, so that you will more easily understand certain things, movements, and happenings that followed upon these beginnings. The ground floor was split up into three divisions—premising that the cottage itself faced due south, the westward division was a big, old-fashioned kitchen, which Colstervine had furnished in correspondence with its tiled floor and oak-raftered ceiling; the eastern was the parlour, a jolly, comfortable, snug place, very bright with its books, its pictures, and its old china and glass. Between these two, cut out, I am sure, of the original kitchen when Colstervine pulled the whole place to pieces and had it renovated, was a sort of lounge hall, fitted with easy chairs and

small tables, and ornamented with old guns and swords and such trophies as foxes' masks and a stuffed bird or two: out of this rose the low, solidly-balustraded staircase which led to the bedrooms above. And out of this, too, opened the front door of the cottage, which, outside, was sheltered by a rustic porch. At this door it was that I heard the low knocking.

Marjorie, too, had heard that, and as I stepped out of the parlour into the little hall, she appeared at the head of the stair, leaning over the balusters in her dressing-gown, her eyes full of curiosity.

"What's that, Dick?" she asked. "A knock?"

"Somebody at the door," I answered, affecting an indifference which I certainly didn't feel. "A gamekeeper, perhaps, thinking Colstervine's here—he said that gamekeepers and watchers sometimes dropped in on him at night."

There was a swinging lamp in the hall, a good one, and I turned its already bright light a little higher. Then I opened the door, purposely drawing aside, so that the light should fall unbroken on whoever was there.

A man stood in the porch—stood in an attitude that suggested considerable doubt and uncertainty: he looked, by his mere attitude, as if he was not by any means sure of his exact bearings. I took him all in at a glance—superficially, that is. A very decent, respectable-looking man, something above middle age, brown and wrinkled of skin, grizzled as to hair and beard, the sort of man of whom you would have said at one glimpse, that here was a fellow that had seen many lands and sailed most of the seas—there was seafarer written big all over him. As for the rest, he wore a good, I should say nearly new, suit of blue serge, a hard felt billycock hat, a black silk tie done up in a sailor's knot: I noticed that his linen was clean and glossy. And there was a gold chain across his double-breasted waistcoat—not an obtrusive one, but one of those old-fashioned, long, thin chains, such as our grandmothers used to festoon about their necks—I remember having a queer fancy as I looked at him, that he must have coils and coils of that chain stowed away in his waistcoat pocket, where, presumably, his watch lay also.

He could see well into the hall from where

he stood, and I saw that he not only took in a sharp realisation of myself but of Marjorie as well; I saw, too, a flash of something across his face and in his eyes that you would see in the eyes and face of a man who looks at some development of circumstances that surprises and disappoints. And for the moment he seemed to be struck dumb.

"Yes?" I said. "Are you—were you——"

He seemed to catch gratefully at my feeble suggestion, came half a step nearer, and suddenly, as if realising the presence of a lady, took off his hat.

"Flint," he said. "Flint—he used to live in this cottage. Matter of—a many years ago. But"—his eyes were wandering round the little hall by that time—"I reckon he don't live here now? Begging yours and the lady's pardon for making so free as to inquire, master."

"Oh, that's all right," I answered. "No—there's no Flint lives here now. This cottage belongs to Mr. Colstervine of London. We're his friends—staying here. Are you seeking somebody named Flint?"

The man kept his hat in his hands, pressed

against his broad chest; there was something curiously deferential in his manner. He looked from one to the other of us and nodded. "Flint," he said. "Dan Flint—he lived in this cottage when I last see him. Twenty years agone, that is. Mother's—I dunno rightly what relation he was—something akin to mother. But I was raised here—partly. And"—he paused at that, and seemed to think a long time; when he went on, it was as if he had suddenly remembered something. "Paid off at Southampton I was, yesterday, master, and this morning, thinks I, 'I'll go and see if old Dan Flint be alive in his cottage,' and so I makes for Portsmouth, and grad'ally makes across here—and here he ain't."

"You've walked from Portsmouth?" I exclaimed. "Why——"

Marjorie broke in there.

"Dick!" she whispered from the stair. "Why don't you ask the poor man to sit down?"

I wondered then why I hadn't. But I atoned by motioning him to come in; he entered at once, pretty much as a well-bred dog might walk into a drawing-room, and, pointed by me

into the parlour, perched himself, respectfully, on the edge of the nearest chair.

"If you've walked all the way from Portsmouth, you must be tired," I said. "Will you——"

He interrupted me with a deprecating motion of his right hand.

"Well, not from Portsmouth, master," he said. "I makes first for Portsmouth. Then I comes to this here town 'twixt here and the sea—the town with a big church in it."

"Wrychester?" I suggested.

"Wrychester it is," he continued. "And then I walks up here. And till you opens the door, I was in hopes that—when it did open—I should find old Dan Flint. But—'tis all changed, and he's gone—evident."

"I'm afraid we can't tell you anything about him," I said. "Perhaps you may hear of him in the village below. But it's a long walk from Wrychester, and you'd no doubt do with a drink. Will you have one?"

The door of the cupboard in which Colstervine kept his store of wines and spirits happened to be wide open—I had left it open when I got out the whisky for myself—and I

saw the man's eyes travel over its orderly arrangement of shelves and cases. But I saw something else, too; this man was no drinker. His eyes were apathetic, almost uninterested, at the sight of liquor. At the same time he looked pleased.

"'Tis very true I be main hungry and thirsty, master," he said apologetically, "if a drink's handy."

Marjorie had come down the stair and followed me into the parlour, listening. And when the man mentioned that he was hungry, she whisked out across the hall and into the kitchen, and through the open doors I saw her spreading food, and chuckled inwardly at the sight.

"My wife'll give you some supper in a minute," I said. "In the meantime, what do you say to a drop of rum? You're a seafaring man, aren't you?"

The very faintest glisten came into his eyes at the mention of rum, and he nodded his head in assent to both my propositions.

"Used the sea, master, I have, ever since I was a nipper that high," he replied. "Two and forty year of it, now. All over the world.

Many ports. And humble gratitude to you and the lady for making of me welcome in this here port, unexpected."

"Oh, that's all right," said I. "You're welcome, I'm sure. Especially as old Dan Flint seems to have joined his fathers. Dead, eh?"

He looked up at the ceiling and seemed to reflect; after a time he nodded solemnly towards the particular spot at which he had gazed.

"Aye!" he said. "If now I'd only a-thought of it, old Dan Flint, if so be as I had found him here and alive, he'd ha' been—yes—well over eighty years of age. I might ha' known as I shouldn't, only I didn't rightly reckon."

I mixed a tumbler of Colstervine's fine old Jamaica rum and water for this strange visitor, and Marjorie, bidding me bring him into the kitchen for his supper, I conducted him there, and bade him fall to on the liberal provisions she had set out for him. He was a well behaved man, sitting himself down without any shyness or backwardness, and saying his grace like a good Christian; a well-mannered man, too, for before picking up his knife and fork he thanked his hostess almost prettily for her attentions.

That he was hungry was evident, but he ate and drank quietly and decently. The food and drink seemed to refresh him mightily, and he began to talk to us freely about his reminiscences of the cottage in which fate had so curiously thrown us together.

"I see the difference as soon as I set foot in this here old quarry to-night, master," he said. "When I was a nipper this quarry was in its last workings, and old Dan Flint, he live in this cottage. But when I last come here, twenty years agone, there weren't no more workings, and old Dan, he just live here doing nothing. And the grass and the shrubs was a-growing up all over the place, and this here cottage, 'twas what you might call falling to pieces, but old Dan, he said, 'twould last his time, and so, I make no doubt, it did, him being apparently gone, and it now a gentleman's house."

He looked thoughtfully round the cosy kitchen, and his head wagged sideways towards the hearth.

"Old Dan Flint," he remarked, "he always sit in that corner. Had a cheer there—comfortable—what he never let nobody else sit in.

I can see him now, a-setting there, so to speak, of course. Lived with him two year when I was a nipper. And come to see him, time and again, till twenty years agone, since when I never see him no more. And yet never knew, from the first, what relation he was. But something on the mother's side, sort of what they call distant."

"Is your name Flint?" inquired Marjorie.

Our guest shook his head gravely, as if this had been a most important proposition.

"No, ma'am," he replied. "No, my name ain't Flint. My name is Kiffin, William Kiffin. Don't rightly know who I was to start out with. But," he added, as if the thought gave him some curious natural satisfaction, "I do know that now old Dan Flint fare to be dead, I ain't got a single living relative in the world! That is, to be sure, as far as I knows of."

"Nobody hereabouts?" I suggested.

"Not anywheres, master," he replied.

"I suppose you remember some of the people round about here, though, don't you?" I asked. "People in the village at the foot of the hill, for instance?"

He looked doubtful, screwing up his eyes over his plate and evidently trying to think.

"Mrs. Squeech?" suggested Marjorie.

He brightened at that, and for the first time since he had entered the cottage I saw the ghost of a smile on his face.

"I 'member she," he said suddenly. "Her was a squinting female, and old Dan, last time I see him, he said her wanted to wed him for his bit of money. Said, too, as her finished Squeech off with rat poison because he wouldn't bring home his money reg'lar of a Saturday night. But 'tis all twenty year agone, and I ha' seen half the world since then!"

"Will you have a drop more rum, Kiffin?" I said, as he made an end of his supper and drained his glass.

He shook his head in token of a negative that I saw to be genuine.

"No, I thank'ee kindly, master," he said. "I never touches more than one glass o' that commodity at one time, and yours was a gen'-rous 'lowance. I done princely well, many grateful thanks to you and your good lady, and may the Lord reward you. An' old Dan

Flint being gone, I must away too, for 'tis getting late, and——"

Marjorie had gone into the parlour; at this juncture she called me and I went to her. She motioned me to close the door.

"We can't turn that poor man out at this time of night, Dick!" she said, in her best peremptory manner. "Past eleven!—and miles from anywhere."

Considering that Marjorie is a somewhat strapping young woman of decidedly modern ideas and with tastes closely approximating to the practical masculine, it is curious that she possesses an unmistakable vein of soft sentiment. Kiffin, in his character of benighted wanderer come to seek the defunct old Dan Flint, had already worked on her feelings, and I could see that she was by that time more than half inclined to give our queer visitor the best bedroom, while we ourselves camped out in the parlour.

"I'm not sure that Colstervine has a guest-chamber," I said, "and after all——"

"There's that big old-fashioned sofa in the kitchen," she broke in. "If we give him a blanket or two and a rug he can at any rate

rest till morning. Such a decent, quiet man!—didn't you notice that he said his grace before and after his supper?"

"Um!" said I. "He could go down to Mrs. Squeech's village—as he knows these parts that's probably what he intended."

"I believe they all go to bed at nine o'clock in these country places," remarked Marjorie. "And even if he went there, how do we know he'd find a lodging?"

"An utter stranger, you know," I suggested, doubtfully. "And this isn't our house."

"It's just what Colstervine would do," said Marjorie. "Exactly what he'd do!"

"Oh, all right, then," said I. "After all, Wrychester's a long way off, and I dare say he'd get no accommodation nearer. So——"

I went back to the kitchen. Our visitor was standing, hat in hand, where I had left him. He was looking thoughtfully at the spot by the hearth whereon old Dan Flint used to sit in his comfortable, strictly-reserved chair.

"Kiffin," I said, "I think you'd better take a shake-down here for the rest of the night. It's past eleven, and you can't walk back to

Wrychester at this time. Could you get a few hours' rest on that sofa?"

He showed no surprise at my invitation. Instead, he glanced at the sofa, a big, roomy affair that almost filled one side of the kitchen, and then turned to me with an informing smile.

"I've rested on a many worse and harder spots in my time, master," he answered quietly. "I'd be main thankful! But——"

"Well?" I asked, seeing him hesitate.

"I've given a lot o' trouble already," he said. "Your good lady——"

"There'll be no trouble at all," interrupted Marjorie, coming in behind me. "I can give you some blankets and a rug; it'll be better, anyway, than walking miles and miles through the night."

"Then I thanks you kindly, ma'am," he said. "A lie down, and a sleep, is what 'ud come uncommon grateful."

We got him some coverings and cushions, bade him good night, and left him. I locked up the house and the parlour cupboard, and eventually followed Marjorie upstairs. She was in a high state of grace, consequent upon

our good deeds. But there were earthly thoughts in my mind.

"I say!" I said, as I wound up my watch, "is all that stuff of Colstervine's that we had on the supper-table silver?"

"Not at all!" she replied with asperity. "What a question! Plated stuff. And why?"

"Dunno!" I retorted. "I thought—you never know—you see, our friend downstairs might—eh?"

"Don't be a complete ass!" she said. "An honest seafaring man like that! And so well-mannered! I shall give him his breakfast in the morning, and he'll go away with kind thoughts of us."

Full of rectitude and of fresh air, Marjorie slept like a top. I didn't. I kept waking. Once I rose, and going to the head of the stair, listened. I heard our guest snoring—not obtrusively, but plainly—a nice, quiet, steady snore. So he was all right. So, apparently, was everything else. It was then just two o'clock in the morning. I went to sleep again after that: when I next woke it was close on four, and through our open windows came rather more singing of birds in the quarry

and the coppice than I cared about, gladsome as the sounds were. I got up, intending to close the windows for the rest of the night. The dawn was breaking in the east, and in the quarry, and over our garden, and around the belt of pines white mists were curling like fairy phantasms. I stood by the windows for a moment watching—and suddenly, from amongst the tall macrocarpus trees that fringed the garden, a man emerged, dodged like a weasel into the high bushes close by, and vanished.

It was, perhaps, fortunate that I had not then drawn back the curtains; I was looking through a crack between them. And a moment later I saw the man's head above the bushes, where they lessened in height; he was making for the coppice that was before the entrance to the quarry. As he reached it other figures—men—came out of its shadows, as if to join him. I counted them as they stood for an instant silhouetted against the white mist-wreaths. One—two—three—four. Four in all. And all looking our way.

I went noiselessly downstairs, and with a gentle tap at the kitchen door opened it and entered. Kiffin was sitting up, half-dressed,

in his sofa-bed, staring straight at me. I motioned him to speak low, and I spoke low myself.

"Kiffin!" I said. "There are men—four men—hanging about outside the cottage, and obviously watching it. Do you know anything about them?"

His brown face turned the colour of his grey shirt, his jaw dropped, leaving his mouth cavernous, and he lifted a hand to his head, and rose, staggering, to his feet.

CHAPTER III

The Young Jew

I WAS so certain that the man was going to faint, or to collapse altogether, that I made, there and then, for the cupboard in the parlour and sought for some brandy. When I got back to him, he had dropped into a sitting posture on the side of his improvised bed, and was staring at the window: his face was as ghastly as before, and it only began to regain something of its colour when he had gulped down the drink that I handed to him. He shook his head, looked at me apologetically, and motioned with his hand toward his heart.

"Touches me, there, anything of that sort, master," he muttered. "Sudden, like."

"I didn't want to frighten you," I said. "But—now that you're better—what about these men? Do you know anything? There are four of them—outside. And one was in this garden, and seemed, from his movements, to have been at this very window."

His face went grey again at that, and he glanced at the window as if half expecting to see something there. Then he looked at me.

"Men?" he said. "Four of 'em? Four? And here. Then——"

"You'd better out with it, Kiffin," I insisted as he paused. "Are they following you?"

"Followed!" he muttered. "Followed? Aye, that'll be the word—followed. And yet——"

"Who are they, and what are they following you for?" I demanded. "Come, now!"

But I saw even then that I was not going to get any direct answer from him; at any rate, not just then. He began to look this way and that, and to shift his stockinged feet about on the floor.

"And again, it mayn't be so, master," he said. "In these here places, there's gamekeepers, and watchers, and such-like about o' nights—it might be some o' them that you've seen. Likely as not 'twould be so, master."

"Gamekeepers don't sneak under windows and dodge about like weasels," I said severely. "This man I saw was after something or somebody in here. Come, now, Kiffin! Is there

anybody after you? Out with it! Police, now?"

He gave me a look which convinced me that I was on the wrong tack there.

"Police, master?" he answered. "No, there ain't no police after me, I'll warrant you! I wish—I wish——"

"Well, what?" I demanded, impatient of his hesitating manner. "What do you wish?"

"I wish," he said slowly, "that—if it should be as—well, as it might be, I wish we'd the police handy. I should be truly thankful for to see 'em."

"That sounds as if you were afraid," I said. "Now come, you think it possible that these men are after you?"

"Possible," he muttered, after a spell of reflection. "But, I never set eyes on nobody o' that sort when I was in Southampton, nor yet in Portsmouth."

"Nobody of what sort?" I asked.

He gave me one of his queer looks—a look which seemed to imply that some questions answer themselves.

"Nat'rally, a man has enemies, here and

there," he replied. "I'm not without 'em, master!"

"Well?" I said sharply.

"You'll not turn me out o' your door——" he began.

"I'm not going to turn you out of the door," I answered. "I'm not going to open the door, till I know what's outside. If you know——"

"I couldn't say, master," he protested. "Upon my soul's word, master, I couldn't say! And as I said—it might be keepers and such-like."

Seeing that I was not going to get more out of him just then, I went back to my room and looked out of the window. It was at that time just a quarter to five, and the sun was showing above the eastern rim of the old quarry —a fine, hot sun, under whose beams the gossamer-like mists on the edge of the pines were melting and disappearing. I could now see all over the quarry, at any rate in front of the cottage, and all along the face of the pine coppice at its entrance, and I searched every yard of what I could see, and saw nothing of the four men. And when I presently went to a room at the back and from its windows made

a similar inspection, I saw nothing—to all appearance we were as much alone as on the previous evening. I watched for a long time, on both sides, my eyes alert for the stirring of branches, movements among shrubs, for a wisp of smoke from pipe or cigarette: again, I saw nothing. And I began to wonder whether Kiffin's suggestion might not have been right, and if the men I had certainly seen had been game-watchers, one of whom out of mere curiosity had peeped in at the lower windows.

The early morning wore on. Marjorie awoke. I told her of what had happened. She sided with Kiffin's notion about gamekeepers and such-like, and pooh-poohed my ideas about his being followed.

"What was he so frightened about, then?" I demanded. "Bowled clean over!"

"You gave the poor man a shock, of course," she said. "Perhaps he was half-asleep. Let him have his breakfast and go his ways; if we're going to imagine all sorts of things simply because we see men in the quarry, we shall be suffering from nerves before the week-end's over."

We went down together, eventually, to see

about preparing breakfast. Kiffin, however, had anticipated us. He had swept out parlour and kitchen, lighted the kitchen fire, and laid the breakfast table in the parlour as neatly as a trained parlour-maid; the rugs and things which we had given him the night before were all wrapped and folded symmetrically on the sofa.

But I noticed that he had opened neither door nor window, and he glanced at me apprehensively when I went towards the door that gave on the porch.

"All right, Kiffin," I said. "You shan't run into any danger. We'll see that the coast's clear before you leave the cottage. But—you've as good as acknowledged that there may be people following you?"

He made no answer, and Marjorie nudged my elbow as a reminder to let him alone. She gave him his breakfast in the kitchen; as our own came to an end in the parlour, she got up and put on a hat that she had brought down with her.

"What are you going to do, Dick?" she asked suddenly. "I think—there is something. He's afraid of leaving the cottage."

"Didn't I say so?" I retorted. "Do? What can we do? If he is being followed—well, he is! What would you do?"

"I think we should just take a look round, you and I," she said. "Just a stroll round the quarry, and a careful look down the hillside. If we see nothing suspicious, well, then, there's no reason why he shouldn't go on his way. Outside the quarry there, by that coppice, we can see for miles over the hillside."

"Come on, then," I replied. "The good Samaritan business is all very well, but we don't want the man hanging about here all the morning." I went out to the kitchen and found him just risen from his breakfast, and peering furtively out of the window. "Look here, Kiffin," I said, "we're just going to take a thorough look round, and see if there is anyone about. If not, the coast's clear for you. But I wish you'd tell me straight out, is it likely anybody's followed you?"

" 'Tain't what you'd call likely, master," he answered promptly. "Not nohow likely, as the words go. But—it might be."

"Why should anybody follow you?" I persisted.

"As I said before, master, a man has enemies," he answered. "I've—some."

"Look here!" said I. "Let's be plain. If your enemies are outside there, are you afraid of facing them?"

He began to work his jaws, as if he were chewing something; at last he shook his head.

"Couldn't say, master," he answered. "Depends. But I think it was gamekeepers, you see."

I bade him lock the door after us, if he pleased, to make himself safe, in case anybody was dodging about outside, and Marjorie and I quitted the cottage, walked through the garden, and out into the quarry. We heard him lock the door—we heard more; he shot the heavy bolt with which Colstervine had strengthened it.

"There!" I exclaimed. "You heard that? He's both locked and bolted himself in! What's that look like?"

Marjorie made no reply. But when we had walked a few yards across the level of the quarry she spoke in little more than a whisper.

"Dick?" she said.

"Well?" said I.

"Which of us two has the sharper eye for things?" she asked.

"Come on!" I answered. "You see something?"

"Pay no attention," she said. "There's a man watching us from the edge of that coppice. I've seen him ever since we left the cottage. Let's walk straight on to the entrance to the quarry, as unconcernedly as we can."

I have already said that the quarry was entered by a sort of tunnel; roofless, of course; some fifteen to twenty yards in length, cut, originally, through the slope of the hill, and that immediately facing it was a coppice of growing pine and fir. We passed through this tunnel, sauntering along as if bent on no particular business; once or twice Marjorie stopped to gather wild flowers. And then, all of a sudden, as we came to where the tunnel narrowed before finally debouching on the open hillside, four men appeared, breaking out upon us as if from nowhere, and ranging themselves in something like military formation between us and the coppice in front.

"Don't show surprise, Dick," whispered Marjorie. "And keep cool, and be wary."

I did my best to look at the four strangers with no more than the slightly interested curiosity which was permissible under the circumstances. As for Marjorie, she affected a sudden interest in a great clump of gorse that rose just there, but I knew that she was taking stock of the men through its branches. They were coming towards us slowly, diffidently; we got a good look at them. And they were as queer a lot, and as villainous a lot, and as jail-bird a lot, as a man could see, and for one moment I wished I had my good old service revolver in my pocket.

Yet there was something—an indefinable something—about the four, severally and collectively, which convinced me that we ourselves were in no danger. Indeed, they seemed more inclined to be frightened of us than we were of them. They were all young fellows of little more than the hobble-de-hoy stage, and of the type which one calls hooligan in London, and corner-boy in Ireland. Two wore old and dirty cast-off officers' tunics; one covered himself in an ancient trench-coat; out of the four only one had a fairly decent suit; he it was who detached himself from the rest and came forward to

meet us—a little, middling-sized Jew, with bright, beady eyes, a nose several sizes too large for him, and crisp, curling rings of hair, black and oily, under his old billycock hat. He raised that hat, and made us a bow as politely as you please, and the smile that accompanied these actions was wide—and wheedling.

"May I have a word with you, mithter?" he asked, coaxingly. "Jutht a word—on bithneth?"

I purposely gave him what was meant to be a cool, supercilious, and somewhat prolonged inspection. And I knew at once that he had seen service, in some sort, for under my frowning stare he instinctively began to pull himself to attention, and his long, dirty fingers moved towards the seams of his trousers.

"Well?" I said curtly. "What is it?"

"You're living in that little cottage, ain't you, mithter?" he answered, almost eagerly, and with the same wheedling smile. "We thee you and the lady come out of it, jutht now. And—you've got a man in there. Came latht night, didn't he, mithter?—one of uth thee him through the window thith morning. Kiffin!"

"Well?" I repeated.

He looked round at his companions, who were gradually edging nearer—a slinking, shifty-eyed lot.

"We want Kiffin," he said.

I purposely hesitated in answering him, watching him meanwhile as if I scarcely understood his demand. The other three crept up and stood around and behind him, looking from me to Marjorie; there was a certain curious speculation and uncertainty in their restless glances, and they reminded me of boys who, having thrown a ball into somebody's garden, wonder if it is going to be given back to them. But the little Jew chap regarded me steadily enough, and I saw at once that he had plenty of brain-power behind his black beady eyes, and had got to be reckoned with.

"What do you want with Kiffin?" I demanded.

He smiled—queerly—and a glance of comprehension passed between him and the others.

"Thatth our bithneth, mithter," he answered, quietly. "The thing ith—we want him. And we mean to have him. That ith what we've followed him from Portthmouth for."

"Oh, you followed him from Portsmouth

did you?" I remarked, more in the way of fencing with him than from anything else. "Last night?"

"You're right, mithter—latht night," he replied. "And—we know he'th in your little cottage there. Mithter, Kiffin'th got to come out!"

"Why?" I asked.

"We've bithneth with him," he answered. "Our bithneth. Kiffin'll know what it ith, well enough."

I took out my cigarette case, and to create an atmosphere of friendliness, handed it round. They thanked me politely; clearly, whatever it was they were bent on doing, they intended no rudeness nor harm to ourselves.

"It would be better if you told me what you want," I suggested. "There are four of you—and he's only one. Do you mean him any harm?"

"Dependth, mithter," answered the little Jew, promptly. "We ain't dithinclined to be reathonable. What we want, firtht, ith an explanation from Kiffin—he can give it if he likth, mithter. But if he dothn't——"

He paused and glanced round at his follow-

ing. One, a little squint-eyed, red-headed fellow, grinned, showing a set of pointed teeth.

"Well?" I said. "If he doesn't?"

"Then we shall put him through it, mithter!" said the leader, with a sudden determination. "That'th a fact!"

"And get yourselves into serious trouble," I suggested. "What's the use——"

"We than't get ourthelvth into no trouble, mithter," he broke in. "We know our whereabouth. There ain't a houth of any thort for a couple o' mile round here, and 'tain't likely anybody'll be coming along. Kiffin'th in that cottage, and here we thtayth till he com'th out —or we get into him. We want Kiffin!—and we'll have him."

I looked round at Marjorie, who from a little distance behind me was steadily watching this queer lot. She came forward, drawing the Jew's attention.

"Supposing we can get this man to come out and talk to you?" she said. "Will you promise——"

But the Jew lifted a hand in protest.

"We won't promise anything, lady," he said. "We'll do our bithneth with Kiffin in our own

way. All we thay ith thith, let Kiffin treat uth fair and reathonable and no harm'll come to him. But if not—we thall put him through it —proper!"

Then, for the first time, one of the others spoke—a dark-featured, surly looking fellow, who for the last minute or two had been steadily kicking his toe in the turf.

" 'Tain't us as is in any wrong," he growled. "We ain't done nothing. Kiffin, he done it—cruel! And knows it."

"What's he done?" demanded Marjorie.

All four looked at each other, and all relapsed into silence.

"If he's wronged you, and you'd only tell us——" suggested Marjorie.

The little Jew turned on me with a knowing look that would have done credit to a diplomatist.

"Mithter!" he said. "You get Kiffin to come outthide! Let him treat uth fair—he knowth what about—and we'll treat him fair. We can't thay no better, can we, mithter? And we don't want to make no trouble for you and your good lady—we don't, mithter. But we want Kiffin, and we'll have him!"

"And I suppose that you'd go to the length of—breaking into the cottage, eh?" I asked. "You may as well speak straight out."

"Never mind what we might do, mithter," he answered. "Thith here ith a conferenth—there needn't be no unpleathantneth if——"

I exchanged a glance with Marjorie, and together, without another word, we turned back towards the cottage.

"What's it all mean?" said Marjorie.

"Mean?" I answered. "Money! The probability is that our guest, who says his grace so punctiliously, has done these chaps, somehow or other, and they want their own. And they're going to have it out of Kiffin one way or another way. An ugly situation—for him."

"You'll not get him to come out to them," she said.

Although I said nothing to her on the point, I was somewhat doubtful if Kiffin would let us in. I had already seen enough of him to know that he was a man of observation and resource; he would have noticed, I felt sure, that the doors of the cottage—two of them, one front, one back—were particularly strong and well endowed with locks and bolts; and

that all the windows, upstairs and down, were fitted with inside shutters across each of which a heavy iron bar could be slipped; the whole place, indeed, was relatively impregnable, and as it was well victualled a garrison could hold out in it for some time until help came. Now Kiffin was inside, and he must have seen his enemies as they talked to us, and . . .

But he let us in, locking and bolting the door again the instant we had covered the threshold. And I saw then that he was frightened no longer; he looked as if he had made up his mind about something or other. So I spoke straight out.

"Kiffin!" I said sternly. "Those fellows want you! You've got to go out and speak to them—now!"

"Neither now nor at any time, master," he answered quietly. "Out of this house I do not go!"

CHAPTER IV

Hidden Treasure

THE first effect of this determined answer was that we both pulled ourselves up short there in the little hall, staring at its giver in sheer amazement. He gave us stare for stare, though with no rudeness, shook his head, and turned away towards the kitchen.

"You seem to be adopting a very high tone!" I said. "This isn't your house, you know."

He raised his hand with a deprecating gesture.

"I'm very well aware of that, master," he answered. "But—it's all the shelter there is between me and the fear of murder! And out of it I don't go—yet."

"Murder?" I exclaimed. "Fear of it? From these fellows?—outside?"

"Aye, and bloody murder!" he answered. "I wasn't sure—I couldn't be certain—I hoped it might be as I said—gamekeepers—such-like—

but when you went up there and talked to them, in the open, I saw what it was. Would you have me go out and be knifed? I'm not going, while there's what there is outside. Especially," he added, with a glance around us, "especially when there's stout doors and barred shutters 'twixt me and that!"

Marjorie and I looked at each other.

"Give him their message, Dick," she said, suddenly.

"Yes," said I. "Look here, Kiffin, these fellows want you, and they mean to have you. But they've assured us——"

"Assured!" he interrupted, turning his eyes towards the ceiling. "Their assurance? Oh, Lord!"

"Assured us that if you'll only talk to them, they'll be reasonable," I continued. "They want an explanation from you. You've evidently had some transaction with them that isn't to their liking. They've promised me that if you'll have it out with them you shall come to no harm. I think they meant that; I'm sure they did. If, as I suspect, it's money——"

He interrupted me again, shaking his head.

"Master," he said, "you don't know nothing

about it, nor yet about them. I'm safe here, and out of this place I'm not going while they're hanging around, at any rate. Four against one!—and such a four! I'd have a knife in my throat before ever I crossed that bit o' garden. No!"

I saw that he was convinced of the truth of what he was asserting, and I hesitated, utterly perplexed.

"If you'd only tell me what it's all about?" I suggested.

"Not worth while, master," he answered promptly. "My business. And this here situation—unfortunate, I grant you, for you and your kind lady—it can't go on for ever, nor for long. There'll be somebody coming round."

"That's doubtful," said I. "We're miles out of the way."

"You'll have a woman that comes to work," he suggested. "She——"

"Nobody will come before to-morrow," said Marjorie.

"Keepers, then," he retorted. " 'Tain't believable that somebody'll not come round. And then we sends for the police."

"It's more than possible that nobody will

come near the place before the woman comes to-morrow morning," said I. "And if these fellows are still hanging about, do you suppose they'll let her get within earshot? They could easily tell her that we've gone away for the day, and that she's not to come until Monday. You're putting us in a very unpleasant position. Do you think we wish to be kept prisoners?"

"We can stand a siege, master," he replied, coolly. "I've been taking a look round while you and your good lady was out, and there's enough provisions in this cottage to last us three for a fortnight and more, if need be. Likewise good liquor—wines and spirits—and plenty of it. So—there we are! 'Tis the fortune o' war, master, and lucky we should consider of ourselves to be so well purvided. We ain't likely to go hungry, nor yet without a sup o' good stuff to wash it down! And, as I say, somebody's sure to come. Master, we can hold out!"

I think Marjorie and myself must at that moment have been staring at him like a couple of fools; certainly I felt as if I were open-

mouthed and utterly vacant. It was she who first found her tongue.

"I'll tell you what it is, my man!" she suddenly exclaimed. "You're about the coolest hand I ever came across! Yet—you were frightened enough this morning."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, almost with humility. "I'm not a-going to deny that. But knowing now what can be done, I ain't so any longer. As I say, we can hold out."

Marjorie turned away and went upstairs to our room. A moment later she called me. I went up and found her standing by the window, looking out on the quarry. There was nobody in sight; the gang had disappeared.

"What's going to be done, Dick?" asked Marjorie. "Are we going to be cooped up here at that man's pleasure?"

"You might add something about the four young scoundrels outside," I remarked. "It seems to me that we're between cross-fires, Kiffin on one hand, and those chaps on the other."

"Then we'd better help ourselves," she said. "I suggest we go for the police, or for some similar help."

"Um!" said I. "Do you suppose those rascals would ever let us leave the quarry while Kiffin's here? I don't! And I'm only one against four. If only we had a couple of revolvers!"

"My notion is that the thing can be arranged," she remarked. "I'm sure—as you've always suggested—it's money. If Kiffin would only say——"

"Kiffin won't say anything," I interrupted. "You've heard him, and seen him. He knows what we don't know. If we only did——"

"They all know what we don't know," said Marjorie. "There's a lot behind this. But here we are, you and I, like rats in a trap! And we haven't even got privacy in our trap! Bottled up here, with Kiffin!"

"You thought him an absolutely model person last night," I said. "He said his grace, before and after his supper."

"Why discuss or refer to the past?" she demanded severely. "What we're concerned about is the present. If this is going on I suggest that we just clear out, and go home."

"Leaving Colstervine's cottage to Kiffin and

four young ruffians?" I asked. "A bit cowardly, eh?"

"Well, what are we to do?" she asked. "This is—all rot!"

"It strikes me that we haven't much choice in the matter," I retorted. "It's not what we are going to do, but what's going to be done with us. There's that chap sitting in our kitchen, and there are four other chaps waiting for him outside. He won't go out, and they can't get in. At least——"

Just then a firm, decided knock sounded on the front door. With one accord Marjorie and I stuck our heads out of the window. There, a few feet below us, half in, half out of the porch, stood the young Jew. I coughed: he looked up, expectant. "It's no good," I said. "He won't come out to you."

He smiled queerly, gave me a knowing look, and came under the window.

"Not under a thafe conduct, mithter?" he asked. "Such ath I give you, jutht now?"

"Not under anything!" I replied. "He says you'll murder him."

He lifted his right forefinger, and meditatively rubbed the side of his big nose.

"We will murder him if he don't come to, mithter," he answered. "He'th no more chance o' getting away from uth, now we have come acroth him, than a rat hath of ethcaping from a good trap. We've got Kiffin! But—I'm all for negothiationth, mithter—mythelf. Compromithe."

"Well?" said I.

"What I thuggetht ith thith here," he continued. "Can't be plethant for you and your good lady to have thith bithneth going on——"

"It's extremely unpleasant," I said. "I wish you and Kiffin would take your business elsewhere!"

"Dependth entirely on him, mithter," he answered. "We're agreeable. And what I thay ith thith. You're a gentleman, you are, and you'll play fair. Do you come out again, mithter, and we'll put our cathe before you, truthful, and you'll thee how cruel bad we been done by Kiffin. But—if he'll come to termth—reathonable and proper termth—we'll treat with him, through you. And then——"

"You go away," I said. "Go back to the mouth of the quarry. I'll speak to Kiffin—and then we'll come out to you."

He went off at once, and Marjorie and I went downstairs. Kiffin had pulled the heaviest table in the hall in front of the door, and was standing on it, peering through the glass transom above the lintel. There was a patent ventilator in that transom, and he had opened it.

"Now—Kiffin," I said, with as much sternness as I could muster. "I suppose you overheard all that that Jew chap said just now? Very well—we're going out to hear exactly what it is they want. If I consider that their claim—whatever it may be—against you is a just one, I shall side with them. And we shall fetch the police. Now pull that table out of the way."

He still stood on the table, and before he descended from it he cast another look through the transom. Apparently he made sure that the Jew had gone away up the quarry, for he got down looking quite satisfied and drew the table back to its proper place in the middle of the hall.

"I ain't no objection in the world to your going out, master," he said. "Always purviding as you leaves me in. But I don't think you'll fetch no police. 'Cause why? You

won't be allowed to! And if folks will stick their heads into hyæna's cages—well, 'tain't no business o' mine. On'y, if I might humbly advise—I should say stay where you was. In comfort—and lux'ry. I says again, master—we can hold out."

"Oh, rot!" said I, angrily. "This is getting a bit too much. I'm going to have the whole lot of you off my premises. Open that door—as you're standing by it."

He turned the key and drew the bolt at once, and Marjorie and I walked out—to hear bolt shot and key grate the instant we had passed the threshold.

"I wonder if this is a wise thing?" muttered Marjorie. "Locked out!"

"What else is there to do?" said I. "We shall at any rate get some explanation of all this infernal mystery! And, as I said, if I find that Kiffin's done those chaps any way—as I guess he has!—I shall side with them. Anyhow, I'm going to have Kiffin out of that cottage, even if these fellows have to drag him out. Come on!—let's hear what it's all about, and then, perhaps, we shall know where we are."

We went forward to the mouth of the quarry, where the young Jew and his three companions were waiting for us. I have already said that they were a particularly villainous-looking lot—villainous is, perhaps, rather too strong a term; hang-dog would suit them better—but unpresentable as they were, both Marjorie and I now noticed that we had somehow or other gained favour with them, and as we drew near they welcomed us with smiles—sheepish on the part of three, coaxing and confidential on that of the fourth, their self-constituted leader, who, as if doing the honours, pointed us courteously to a block of stone that lay amidst the herbage.

"We take it uncommon kind of you to come out, mithter—and lady," he said. "We're poor fellowth, but honetht, which Kiffin, in there, he ain't. He done uth a fair bloomin' treat, Kiffin, mithter, and no error, ath you'll thee, if you'll lithen a bit. You thee——"

"Look here, my lads," I broke in. "If you want me to do anything for you, you've just got to tell me the truth. There you are—and there's Kiffin in our cottage. I don't want him

there, and I don't want you here. Now then, straight out, what's all this about?"

By that time all four had grouped on the grass before us, squatting or kneeling, and all intently interested in us and the event of the moment. And when I demanded full explanation the three subordinates turned like one man on the little Jew, who, on his part, gave the sharpest-looking of the lot a warning glance that began with him and ended in the direction of the cottage.

"Keep your opticth on that door, Fakoe," he commanded. "If you thee ath much ath a hair of Kiffin——" He turned abruptly on me: "That'th all right, mithter," he went on. "We're going to take you into our confidenth. We been talking about you and your good lady, and we like your lookth—you'll play thtraight with uth—you ain't the thort to thee poor fellowth put on ath we been. Mithter!—you ain't any idea of what it ith that Kiffin'th after?"

"Idea!" I exclaimed. "Not the remotest! What is he after?"

"I'll tell you, mithter." He paused for a

moment, looking round his men with a subtle grin. "Thwag!"

"Swag?" I said. "What swag?"

"Thwag that'th hidden away, thomewhere in thethe part'th, mithter," he answered. "That'th it!—that'th Kiffin'th little game. Thwag!"

"Do you mean money?—hidden about here?" I asked. "That it?"

He smiled, shrugging his shoulders, and spreading out his expressive fingers.

"Oh, well—diamanth and pearlth and watcheth—that thort o' thing, mithter; moneyth worth, anyhow," he replied. "And, by all accounth—hith accounth—a nithe bit, too! Look here, mithter, Kiffin got hiththelf into your cottage latht night, we know he did. And no doubt give himthelf out ath a rethpectable thailor man? Of courth!—but he wath having you for the mug, mithter. He ain't no rethpectable thailor man, Kiffin—leathtwayth if he ever wath, it'th a long time ago. He'th an old lag, Kiffin—he done time!—been doing time motht of hith time, thelp me if he ain't! Ath if we didn't know!"

He looked round his myrmidons again, and they all laughed hoarsely; evidently this reflec-

tion on the grace-repeating Kiffin's character afforded them some strange pleasure.

"You mean that Kiffin's a thief?" I asked.

"That'th what he ith, mithter, in polite language," assented the spokesman. "And done time for it more than oneth. Theen the inthide o' Portland, Kiffin hath, and o' Parkhurtht, too. Not that we want to be too hard on him that way, mither—he'th had hith mithfortuneth like anybody elth. What we're on to Kiffin about ith that he done the dirty on uth uncommon thabby."

"Well?" I said, as he looked appealingly at us. "We're waiting to hear. And as I said, if you want our sympathy, plain truth!"

"Plain truth it ith, mithter, and no other!" he answered, eagerly. "And I put'th it to you, ath a gentleman and ath a lady, how'd you like to be treated ath Kiffin hath treated me and my mateth? Thith way. Here we are, mithter, four young Portthmouth fellowth, all palth. We ain't beautieth, no doubt, but we done our bit when it come to it, and there ain't one out of the four that hathn't a wound or two, and you'll know what that mean'th, mithter, 'cauth I thee you got a bit of a limp your-

thelf. Well, when we get'th demobbed, we knockth about Portthmouth a while doing nothing, all four of uth with a bit of money. And we get'th—never mind how nor where—to know Kiffin. And one day we are with him in a thertain pub, mithter, having a drink or two, and he leadth the converthation, artful like, to how we could put a bit of the ready in our pocket'th. You put it to yourthelf, mithter, how he come round uth. He'th a tongue like oil, Kiffin, and we're thimple chapth. Here we are with him, and him thandin' drinkth—Fakoe there, what'th now a-watching the cottage door, and Dex—that'th Dex with the red hair and faulty eye—and Greever, and me, all palth."

"What's your name?" I asked, after making mental notes of the others. "Better let me get a clear understanding."

"My nameth Melchithedech, mithter," he answered, blandly. "Melky for short. Well, ath I thay, me and Fakoe, and Dex, and Greever, there we are with Kiffin. And he pitcheth uth a tale—and mind you, mithter, we believe it'th a true one, 'cauth of what they call corroborative evidenth. Maybe you ain't heard about it,

mithter, but thome yearth ago—I can't thay how many, exactly—there wath a big burglary at one o' the printhipal jewellerth shopth in Portthmouth, and all the betht of the thtock thtolen? Thouthandth o' poundth worth, mithter, and never recovered, and nobody ever nabbed for it. Now then, Kiffin, he tellth uth that he knew of an old friend of hith that knew where that thtuff had been planted, away up here on thethe hillth, and that thith here friend hadn't no occathon for it himthelf, being on hith latht legth, but would thell the thecret for a conthideration. And Kiffin thaid that if we'd come in with him, we'd buy the thecret and find the thwag, and claim the reward that wath thtill good."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, seeing daylight through this tangle. "Ah! So Master Kiffin didn't propose that you should appropriate the swag when you found it? You weren't to convert it to your own use?"

The three subordinates uttered sounds indicative of dissent, and Melchisedech shook his head knowingly.

"No, mithter," he answered. "There wath a reward of a thouthand poundth offered, and

we wath to share it. But Kiffin, he hadn't the money to buy up the thecret, and tho he invited uth to come in. And we did, mithter! We put'th our poor bit'th of money together, all we had, mithter and lady, and hand'th it over to Kiffin, and while Fakoe, and Dex, and Greever there wait'th at the pub, I goeth with Kiffin to a thertain thtreet in Portthea to get the thecret and the particularth. And Kiffin done me!—me what never wath done before!—done me a treat, and before my very eyeth, and with our money in hith pocketth!"

"What did he do?" I asked.

"Dithappeared, mithter, in Commercial Road," replied Melchisedech. "Dithappeared!—like dew in thummer!"

CHAPTER V

Barred Out

HAVING been stationed at Portsmouth more than once in my time, I knew very well what the little Jew meant; the Commercial Road, at certain hours of the day, is about as thickly thronged a thoroughfare as you can find in any city of the world.

"Slipped you, eh?" I said. "Got away?"

"You're right, mithter," replied Melchisedech. "He did thlip me, and he did get away! There he wath at one minute, and the next he wath gone. And our poor bit o' money gone with him!"

"How much?" I asked.

"There wath ten pound o' mine, mithter, and ten o' Greever'th there," he answered mournfully, "and Dex, he forked out six pound ten—and how much wath there o' yourth, Fakoe?"

The individual with the red hair and faulty eye, who chewed bits of the herbage while he

kept a sharp look-out on the cottage, shifted his angle of vision sufficiently to give his leader a careless glance.

"Five quid—and all I got!" he replied.

"It wath about all we all got, mithter," said Melchisedech. "Thirty-one pound ten we raithed amongtht uth, and Kiffin he wath to make it up to fifty. Then we wath all to go equal thareth in the reward—thee? Good bithneth—if Kiffin had played thtraight. But ath I thay, he thlipth me and go'th off with our money in hith pocket. You can't wonder that we want Kiffin, mithter!"

Marjorie and I looked at each other. I saw at once that she and I had a mutual feeling about what we had just heard. Unpromising as they were in appearance, the truth seemed more likely to lie with these fellows than with the respectable-looking gentleman in our cottage. But I wanted to know more.

"Look here!" I said. "Did Kiffin tell you who it was that had this secret to tell?"

"Not prethithely, mithter, he didn't," replied Melchisedech. "But he give uth a hint or tho, and knowing Kiffin, we put two and two together, d'ye thee? Our notion ith that Kiffin

got the tip from another old lag, what he very likely come acroth in Parkhurtht or thomewhere—he'd on'y jutht come out from doing time when we met him, Kiffin hadn't. Likely the chap what give Kiffin the office ith thtill in quod, and 'll be tho for thome yearth—thethe thingth ith talked about among them chapth, mithter—pathed from mouth to mouth, d'ye thee?"

"You really think there's something in it?" I asked. "It wasn't all bluff on Kiffin's part, just to get your money?"

The four exchanged glances, and every man Jack shook his head—with decision.

"No, mithter!" answered Melchisedech. "It wathn't bluff. That thtuff'th hidden away thomewhere up here, top o' thethe hillth. And now that Kiffin'th here, it'th ath thertain ath daylight that Kiffin knowth where it ith. He mayn't ha' known when he give me the thlip—but he knowth now. That'th what Kiffin'th after, mithter. And, of courth, we're after Kiffin."

"You haven't told me how you came across him again," I said.

"That wath yethterday," he replied.

"Greever there—he done it. Uncommon clever, mithter, ith Greever, though he don't look it, do yer, Greever? Greever, he happenth to be in Farnham, a bit of a town between Portthmouth and Eathtleigh, yethterday, on bithneth, and he thee Kiffin. And when he onth thet hith opticth on him he didn't take 'em off again—did yer, Greever?"

"No blinkin' fear!" growled Greever. "Ain't he got ten quid o' mine?"

"Jutht tho," said Melchisedech, triumphantly. "Tho Greever, he followth Kiffin. Followth him firtht to Havant, and then to Wrychethter. What did he do, Greever, when he thtruck Wrychethter?"

"Turned into the first pub," replied Greever, promptly.

"And what did you do, Greever?" asked Melchisedech, admiringly, and with a glance at us which was meant to draw out respectful attention. "What you do, eh?"

"Telephoned to you," answered Greever. "There and then!"

"Ain't he a thmart un, mithter?" demanded Melchisedech, rapturously. "Didn't lothe no time, did he? He'd make a good 'tec, would

Greever, if he'd give hith mind to it. And what you done nexth, Greever, when you rung me up?"

"Hung round till he come out, and followed him," replied Greever. "Followed him till he gets into this here cottage."

Marjorie and I exchanged another glance.

"Oh!" I said. "So—you actually saw him arrive here?"

Greever gave me a calm and critical inspection.

"I see you let him in," he answered, "and I see your lady set his supper for him. Them window-blinds o' yourn don't fit tight. And I see you give him blankets and things for a shake-down on the sofa, and so, of course, I knows he's safe for the night."

"Ain't he a thmart 'un?" repeated Melchisedech. "Kiffin—he ain't no clath again Greever, when it cometh to it! And tho, you thee, mithter, ath thoon ath Greever knowth hith man ith thafe, he hopth it back to Wrychethter and meetth uth—we come on by the latht train, me and Dex and Fakoe—and of courth we cometh up here. To thay good morning to Kiffin, of

courth—which we ain't had that pleathure yet. But it'th got to be thaid, mithter."

There was a brief spell of silence. While it lasted, all with the exception of Fakoe, who, having been detailed for the purpose, never took his squinting eyes off the cottage, watched Marjorie and myself most intently, as if waiting for words of super-wisdom.

"So that's all, is it?" I said at last. "The whole story? Kiffin's done you out of thirty odd pounds, and you believe that he knows where some stolen stuff is hidden away up here, and that he's after it? Is that the situation?"

"You couldn't ha' put it clearer, mithter," replied Melchisedech. "That ith the thituation!"

"Very well," I continued. "Since there's only one thing to be done: my wife and I are now going for a walk. We'll drop in on the policeman in the village at the foot of the hill, tell him to telephone his superintendent, get assistance, and come up here. Then you can hand Kiffin over. That's the plan of campaign —sure and simple."

I rose from the block of stone on which Marjorie and I had been sitting; she rose too. We

looked round the group. Already their faces had fallen, and their eyes wore a different expression. And Melchisedech shook his head.

"The poleeth?" he said, haltingly. "No, mithter—that won't do! We ain't going to have no poleeth in at thith game—not if we can help it! That 'ud thpoil everything, mithter. No—we can't do with no poleeth!"

"No blinkin' fear!" muttered Greever.

There was another brief spell of silence. We stood and looked at them: they stood and looked at us.

"Oh, very well!" I said at last. "Do as you like—but I'm going for the police, on my own hook. I'm not going to have Kiffin in my house, nor you hanging about for him. And if you won't be wise enough to fetch the police yourselves, while you've good grounds for doing so—then I shall!"

I said all this with as much boldness and determination as I could muster, taking a high tone in the faint hope that it would carry us through. But I knew already that it wouldn't —the situation had wholly changed. The mere mention of an appeal to the duly constituted authorities had roused everything in these four

that we least wished to see. Once again they were the furtive-eyed, watchful, suspicious lot that we had encountered in the early morning.

I had moved slightly towards the entrance to the quarry as I finished speaking; Marjorie moved with me. There was a sharp glance of the Jew's beady eyes from left to right, and he and his satellites lined up in front of us. He spoke then—and his tone was as peremptory as you please.

"We can't have that, mithter!" he said. "We don't want no unpleathantneth—ethpethially with a lady in the cathe—but we can't have no poleeth fetched here. Thith ith our bithneth, mithter, and we mutht do it in our way."

"Do you mean to interfere with mine?" I demanded.

"We don't want to interfere with nobody, mithter," he answered. "But—we ain't going to let anybody interfere with uth. We're going to have Kiffin out o' that cottage, one way or another, and we're not going to allow anything to thtop uth! Be reathonable, mithter! You mutht thee that we don't want no poleeth here!"

"Are you going to stop me and my wife from leaving this quarry?" I said. "Come on, now—yes or no?"

"You've hit it, mithter," he replied, with ready candour. "We are! We ain't going to allow nothing other than what we like'th until we've got Kiffin. Look here, mithter—lithen to reathon. We know thith plathe—we give it a good look round firtht thing thith morning. 'Tain't likely ath anybody'll come thith way—it'th clean out o' the way of anything or for anybody. We're not at all likely to be interrupted, and we got Kiffin in a trap. We thall have him!—and when we done with him, we'll hop it. Don't make trouble, mithter. We—we thought ath how you'd thide with uth—and bring Kiffin to hith thentheth."

I was boiling with rage at the restriction of our liberty, but a warning cough from Marjorie made me restrain myself.

"How the devil can I bring Kiffin to his senses?" I demanded. "I've told you already he won't come out to you."

"Yeth, but you hadn't heard our thtory then, mithter," he persisted. "Now that you have, we thought prapth you'd talk to Kiffin and tell

him it ain't no good. He'th either got to come to termth—or we thall put him through it."

"How are you going to get at him?" asked Marjorie.

They all turned from me to her, looking her up and down in silence. Then they looked at each other and still kept silence.

"Look here!" said I. "If—if I go and talk to Kiffin, on your behalf—what are your terms? You want your money back?"

"We'll have our money back, mithter, without your talking to Kiffin," replied Melchisedech. "Now that we've run Kiffin down you can bet your thtarth that he'll never get away from uth! We want more than that!"

"What, then?" I asked.

"We want to know where that thwag ith hidden," he answered. "He'll know. He ain't come here for nothing, Kiffin ain't. Did he tell you why he did come here, mithter? Did he now?"

"He said he came to see an old friend of his, Dan Flint," I replied. "A man who used to live in that cottage."

"Aye, when, mithter?" he said scornfully. "Fakoe there, when we come to it latht night,

he knew thith plathe; been here before, hadn't yer, Fakoe? If there ever wath a man called Dan Flint lived here, it mutht have been a long time ago, for Fakoe, he knew that cottage when it wath all tumble-down, till a London gent bought it and done it up. No, mithter, Kiffin, when he come latht night, wathn't after no Dan Flint'th, he wath after what he'th after now—that thwag. And tho, being ath we've trapped him, we're going to have our money out of him and the thecret about where the thtuff'th hidden. If not——" He gave me a significant look as he paused, but Greever, less punctilious, voiced his feelings in plain language.

"We shall do him in!" he growled. "I'll have my ten quid or his blinkin' blood!"

"You're all threatening murder, you know," I said. "You'd far better have told the police all about it. As it is, you'll all get into the hands of the police."

"No, we than't, mithter, begging your pardon," retorted Melchisedech, with complete assurance. "Not if Kiffin playth thtraight. If he'll do that, we've nothing to do but give information ath to where the thtuff ith and claim the

reward; nobody can't touch uth, thee, mithter? It all dependth on Kiffin."

I hesitated a little; then motioned to Marjorie and turned to the cottage.

"Very well," I said. "I'll speak to Kiffin again. You want him to keep his bargain?"

"It 'ud be much pleathanter for everybody, and for you and your good lady, mithter, if he would," answered Melchisedech. "Mithter! Tell him that he hathn't an earthly! He'th thrapped! And we're all round him, like tho many terrierth. Either he com'th out—or we go in! And if we go in——"

He gave me another look, more sinister than significant, and Marjorie and I, for the second time that morning, retreated to the cottage. But we paused before reaching it.

"I say, you know!" I said, looking round, though we were well out of earshot. "This is a lot more serious than it seems. We're absolutely at the mercy of those four young devils! —absolutely!"

"And of Kiffin," she answered.

"What on earth's to be done?" I asked. "There's only one way out of this quarry, through that entrance, and they'll never let us

pass. While we were talking I was examining every side. There isn't a place that one could scale. We're literally imprisoned! And there's no likelihood of anybody coming near us before to-morrow morning."

"Something will happen before that, Dick," she said. "Do you think those men are armed?"

"I guess they'll all have some particularly ugly knives, if they've nothing else," I answered. "That's the sort of thing they carry. If only we had a couple of revolvers!"

"Is there anything of that sort in the cottage?" she suggested.

"No idea," said I. "Colstervine never mentioned it. What licks me is, what are we—you and I—going to do? I can't tackle those chaps single-handed—they'd knife me without the least compunction, and——"

"It's not going to come to that," she broke in. "If we've got nothing else we've got our wits. We must circumvent the whole lot—Kiffin as well as those four. If we could only get Kiffin out——"

"It would probably mean murder," I said.

"However, let's hear what the scoundrel has to say."

We went forward to the cottage. And here, in view of what is yet to be told, let me set down some further particulars of its exact situation in the quarry. It stood almost in the centre, a four-square building in the middle of a little garden, the front part of which was given up to shrubs, trees, flowers, the hinder part to vegetables, the whole being enclosed in a high hedge of privet and macrocarpus. There was, accordingly, a good deal of cover immediately around the cottage itself. But outside the surrounding hedge, and from it right up to the sides of the quarry, there was comparatively bare ground, broken only by stunted shrub and by hummocks of refuse over which grass and bramble and their like had grown. It was, therefore, impossible for anybody to quit the cottage and make for the edges of the quarry unobserved—that is, under such surveillance as the lynx-eyed four whom we had just left would be sure to exercise, things being what they were. And here was another factor in the situation which had to be taken into account—I had just remarked to Marjorie

that there wasn't a place anywhere along the thirty-feet-high sides of that quarry that we could climb, even if we could escape the watchfulness of Melchisedech and his gang. An expert cragsman might have done it, but we couldn't; for us there was no way out but that tunnel-like entrance in front of the cottage. And there the cordon was tightly drawn and resolute.

Utterly outfaced by these perplexities, I paused again as we came to the gate of the front garden. What were we to do in this annoying situation?—literally pinned down and helpless.

"Look here!" I said, in sheer desperation. "Before we talk to this infernal Kiffin just let's think what's best for ourselves! Never mind Kiffin and never mind those murderous young miscreants behind us. What ought we to do for our own safety? It's beastly to think of being cooped up in that cottage with Kiffin, but mightn't it be best to follow his advice and just stick in till somebody comes?"

"When is that likely?—to-day at any rate?" answered Marjorie. "And, in my opinion, if Kiffin won't treat those four men they will do

something desperate before the morning's over."

"They can't get in," said I. "The cottage is strong enough. Kiffin knows that."

"No," she answered. "But—they can set it on fire."

I hadn't thought of that, but I saw the possibilities of it at once. Smoke Kiffin out of his lair!—yes, that was certainly one way of doing things.

"They've said they'll have him, you know," added Marjorie. "And—they will. And—if we can't persuade him to do a deal with him, I think they'll move. They know that there's always the chance of interruption. I wish——"

"What?" I demanded, eager for any manner of suggestion.

"I wish we could think of some way of tricking them, getting round them, doing them in some fashion," she said. "I thought once—how would it be if we gave—those four—some of Colstervine's stock of—say, whisky? Would it send them to sleep?"

I laughed aloud—for the first time since Kiffin had come knocking at our door.

"Bless your innocent heart!" said I. "It 'ud

probably make 'em into howling, murderous, irrepressible savages! Besides, friend Melchisedech's a bit too sharp for that. Bithneth —that's all he's after—with strict attention to it. No!—the only thing we can do at present is to have another shot at Kiffin."

I swung open the little rustic gate and we entered the garden. And as we cleared the thick-branched macrocarpus trees I saw at once that since we had walked out of it, Kiffin had taken the cottage into his own hands. Every window that gave on the front was closely shuttered, and presumably barred; going round to the back we found a precisely similar state of things. We knocked and called for a good ten minutes and got no answer. Then we began to comprehend. Kiffin had calmly shut the rightful tenants out, and constituting himself a garrison, was evidently going to stand a siege.

CHAPTER VI

Breach o' the Peace

WE turned away from that cottage, feeling, I think, as a man might feel who, seeking his way to a presumably easy entrance, finds himself suddenly and unexpectedly faced by a blank and doorless wall. It had never occurred to me that Kiffin would bar us out. We had shown him a good deal of kindness and consideration the night before, and I could scarcely believe—however much of a scoundrel he might be—that his professions of gratitude were entirely hypocritical. Yet here was the fact—he was there, safely posted in our cottage, and we were outside it, and he would not even answer a call from us.

We went off in silence—I, on my part, too amazed and indignant for words. We were in as disagreeable a predicament as we well could be. Here was one scamp intrenched in our sole refuge; there, fifty yards away,

were four others who would not let us leave the quarry to seek help elsewhere. It was useless to deny the fact—we were homeless! But there was more—I did not think of it, at first, but Marjorie did, and she suddenly turned on me with a scared look.

"Dick!" she exclaimed. "Food!"

I realised what she meant. We were not only cut off from shelter—we were driven away from Colstervine's well-stocked larder and his generously-supplied cupboard. And Kiffin—infernal scoundrel!—had got the run of both!

"I'm getting hungry," said Marjorie. "We hurried so over breakfast, and I hadn't very much then. And it's now nearly eleven o'clock. What are we to do? He evidently won't let us in, and these men won't let us out! We shall starve."

"There's this about it," I answered. "They'll want food themselves. They can't go without food any more than we can. Come along back to them—I'm going to talk pretty stiffly. We can't go on like this."

We went up to the entrance again. We could see the heads of Melchisedech and his crew over the top of the low bushes; they were

evidently sitting on the ground. When we came nearer we saw why. They were having a picnic. On a slab of stone they had a big, crusty loaf of bread, flanked by a substantial wedge of cheese; each man's cheek was bulging as he munched. Melchisedech smiled at us.

"Any luck, mithter?" he asked. "Ith Kiffin in hith right thentheth yet?"

"Look here!" said I—angrily, no doubt. "This stupid business has got to come to an end—we've had enough of it! Kiffin's barred and bolted himself in, and we can't get a word out of him. He's not going to admit us—to our own cottage!—and so we're without shelter—and without food. You talk about his right senses—you've got to come to yours, and let us go for the police. That's that!"

"Not jutht yet, mithter, it ain't," he answered coolly. "We ain't going to have no poleeth here—not were it ever tho. There'th a lot to be done before that. And ath to food—well, you and your good lady are ath welcome to what we've got ath flowerth ith in May—'tain't much, but it'th thomething," he continued with a grin, as he pointed to the bread and cheese. "Help yourthelveth, mithter—

good bread and good cheeth—you can go for a long time on that—and here'th a clean knife."

He had been polishing his own knife on the grass as he spoke, and he now handed it to me—an American bowie-knife, double-edged, and as keen as a razor—a fearsome weapon, of which, I suddenly noticed, each of his three companions held a duplicate.

"Don't you be afraid about the food bithneth, mithter," he said, reassuringly. "If thith ith going to be an all-day job with Kiffin—though we don't intend it to be—we'll thee about the commithariat arrangementth. There'll be a thop in that village, foot o' thith hill, and one of uth can eathy go down there and buy what we want—we ain't without money in our pocketth—and what you and your lady wantth too. But—when we've had our thnack, mithter, we're going to work on Kiffin. Ath he won't have anything to thay to you, ath ambathador—all right; it'th war! Help yourthelveth, mithter—with pleathure."

I glanced at Marjorie; she nodded, and I cut two goodly slices of bread, and laid slabs of cheese on them. Making the best of a bad job, we, too, sat down and ate. And presently,

Melchisedech, finishing his last crumbs, turned to the squint-eyed fellow who sat a little apart, still watching the cottage.

"Fakoe!" he said. "Fetch the bottle."

Fakoe jumped to his feet and went off in the direction of the coppice, from which he presently emerged carrying a stone jar. Melchisedech looked at me and grinned knowingly.

"We didn't come without thome provithon, mithter," he said. "We bring a couple o' gallon jarth o' beer up with uth from Wrychethter, ath well ath thith bread and cheeth—that'th the firtht jar that Fakoe'th bringing. We're careful fellowth, mithter, and we thall jutht have one little glath apieth now—and you and your lady thall be therved firtht. Greever!—where'th the glath?"

Greever drew from his pocket a collapsible drinking-cup—some relic, no doubt, of his service days—and Melchisedech, filling it from the jar which Fakoe brought up, handed it politely to Marjorie.

"One all round," he remarked with another grin. "Then the bottle goeth back to keep cool. Hope your bit of a thnack'th done you good, mithter?"

"We're much obliged to you, I'm sure," I replied. "But—what are you going to do next? Be sensible now!—take my advice and let's get the police and give Kiffin in charge, and be done with him. Come, now!"

But he shook his head, more determinedly than ever.

"No, mithter, no!" he answered. "No poleeth—we don't want no dealingth with them—uth and anything in the way of poleeth ain't friendth, nohow. What are we going to do? We're a-going to have Kiffin out o' that!"

"How?" I asked.

He carefully cleaned his ugly-looking knife again, by polishing it on the close-cropped turf, and slipped it into a hip pocket.

'You'll thee, mithter, in a few minuteth," he replied quietly. "The time'th come for action; wordth ain't no good. We're going to move."

"You're going to use force?" I suggested.

"Forth ith the word, mithter," agreed Melchisedech. He slewed round in his seat on the grass and indicated an old, but stout and solid iron-shod piece of timber, the shaft of some derelict cart or wagon which they had found lying amidst similar odds and ends in the

quarry. "Make a good battering ram, that, mithter! We are going to break in that front door! Or—the back one if it theemth eathier."

"Very nice for my friend's property!" I said. "But you'll find it a bit difficult to smash in either."

"We'll have a thtiff try, anyway," he retorted. "And ath for your friend'th property, mithter, you thouldn't ha' let a fellow like Kiffin into your friend'th houthe. I thouldn't if it had been me. But Kiffin ith in, and Kiffin'th got to be fetched out, and we'll get about it."

He got to his feet and turned away to give some order in an undertone to his three satellites. Marjorie and I—emboldened, no doubt, by the lunch of which we had partaken under such singular circumstances—exchanged glances. We were thinking of the same thing —would there be any chance of escape while these fellows were engaged in their assault on Kiffin? But Melchisedech quickly made it clear that we were not going to be favoured in that way. Greever and Fakoe, picking up the shaft, advanced on the cottage; Melchisedech and Dex, hands in pockets, remained where they were.

"That'th the plan o' campaign, mithter," observed Melchisedech. "Them two'll break in the door, while we keep an eye on you and your good lady. We can't afford to take no rithkth, mithter, we can't indeed. We're hoping to get the little affair over pretty quick now, mithter, and then you'll be at liberty again. And, of courthe, if only Kiffin had been thenthible, there'd ha' been no occathion for thith bother—blame Kiffin, mithter, not uth."

"What do you suppose will happen if they do break that door in?" I asked.

"We think that Kiffin'll come to hith thenthith, mithter," he answered gravely. "He'll thee he ain't got an earthly! And then we thall talk bithneth."

"And if he won't talk business?" I suggested.

"Then it'll be a very bad job for Kiffin, mithter," he replied with calm assurance. "A very bad job indeed. Kiffin'll get a few incheth of cold thteel into him."

"That would be a bad job for you too—eventually," said I. "You know it would! Why risk it?"

"We've got to take thome rithkth in motht

thingth, mithter," he remarked, with an air that was either patient or philosophic, and perhaps both. "And we'll take our chance thith time. But I think Kiffin'll thee reathon. Once break in on him——"

He paused to concentrate his attention on the doings of Greever and Fakoe. They had advanced to the gate of the front garden by that time, carrying their battering ram; we expected, in another minute, to hear its first smashing blows on Colstervine's nicely painted door. But before ever Greever, who was at the front end of the shaft, could swing the gate open, we heard something vastly different. From one of the upstairs windows came a couple of sharp flashes, the sound of two shots, and at the same instant Fakoe let out a scream, dropped his end of the improvised ram, stumbled, recovered himself, and clapping his right hand to his left forearm, turned and ran like a hare in our direction, with Greever in close attendance.

"Got one of your men, anyway!" I said, with a purposely sardonic smile at Melchisedech. "Kiffin's not going to take it sitting down, you

see. He's armed! And he's winged that chap."

He made no answer for the moment. Looking at him more closely, I saw that he was staring at the cottage with a queer expression in his eyes and on his shrewd face—it was as if he had seen something, and yet could not believe that he had seen it.

"Kiffin, you see——" I began.

He interrupted me, sharply.

"Kiffin?" he said. "Kiffin! Mithter! Wath there two thotth fired there, or one?"

"Two!" answered Marjorie, promptly. "Two. There were two flashes, at the same time, and from different corners of the window."

Melchisedech's jaw dropped, and his eyebrows went up.

"Then it ain't Kiffin alone!" he exclaimed. "Kiffin'th got a pal with him! Kiffin'th let thomebody into that cottage! And——"

The discomfited vanguard came running up, breathless. Fakoe was tearing off his coat as he drew near. His face was white with fear or shock, but when he had turned up the sleeve of his shirt, evidently under the conviction that

a bullet had gone through his arm, I saw at once that he had got no more than a scratch. A red mark across the outer surface of the forearm showed where the shot, no doubt from an automatic pistol, had just grazed him. Nevertheless, as soon as he saw it, he broke out into fierce cursing of Kiffin, and lavish promises of what he'd give him when he came within arm's length.

"Thut it, Fakoe! There'th a lady prethent," said Melchisedech. "And you ain't hurt, you're on'y frightened. There'th thomething a lot more important than that. Were there two men fired at you from that window, or on'y one?"

Neither Greever nor Fakoe knew. Fakoe, indeed, knew nothing but that a bullet had touched him, nor was he at all interested in anything else. Greever thought there were two shots fired in rapid succession; he had heard one whistle uncomfortably close to his own head. But as to whether the shots came from two weapons——

"There's no doubt about that," said Marjorie, decisively. "There were two separate flashes—simultaneous flashes—one from the

right, and the other from the left hand of the window. I saw them distinctly."

"And tho did I!" observed Melchisedech. "Ain't no uthe denying it. Then there ith two men in that houthe! Kiffin'th got another feller with him ath bad ath himthelf. And yet I'll take my tholemn oath there ain't nobody got in there thith morning, nor thinth we came. Mithter! Ye didn't hear no thoundth in the night?"

"Nothing of that sort," I answered. I, too, had observed that there were two flashes at the same time, from different corners of the window, and I was already convinced that Kiffin had an accomplice with him. "I heard nothing, in fact, except that I once heard Kiffin snoring. And I can't think how he could admit anybody, and hide a man without our knowledge."

"It's possible," murmured Marjorie at my elbow. "There are places that we never went into this morning—that lean-to shed at the back, and the box-room on the ground floor—he could have hidden somebody. Anyway, from what we saw just now, there must be two men in the cottage."

We looked round at the gang. They had drawn together and were talking in low tones. Greever seemed to be advocating some plan; Fakoe, still viciously furious about his mere scratch of a wound, was excitedly supporting him. But Melchisedech, whose brains appeared to be of a peculiarly cool sort, shook his head. It was plain that in everything he was the master-spirit of the gang, and though Fakoe turned away grumbling, and Greever looked black, I could see that they accepted their leader's decision without question. And Melchisedech came over to us. It was clear from his ruminative expression that he was occupied with thoughts and plans of strategy.

"Mithter!" he said. "I hadn't exthactly counted on Kiffin carrying a gun—I never thee one on him when we had our dealingth with him. And I didn't count, neither, on hith having a pal with him. Thircumthtantheth alterth catheth, don't they, mithter?"

"Well?" said I.

"I mutht know a bit more, mithter," he continued, falling into an easy, lounging position as if we were about to have a comfortable and

careless chat. "Now, ath regardth that cottage, mithter?—ith there food in it?"

"Food!" I exclaimed. "There's enough to last Kiffin and his pal—if he has got one, and it seems certain he has—for a month!"

"Tinned thtuff, I reckon?" he suggested.

"All sorts of good things," I answered. "They can live like fighting cocks in there."

"Any drink?" he asked with a sharp glance of his beady eyes.

"There's a cupboard full of wines and spirits," I replied. "And there are two or three cases of bottled ale. I tell you, the place is handsomely provisioned. If you think you can starve them out, you're jolly well mistaken!"

"I didn't thay I did, mithter," he observed. "I'm only wanting to know. But—what about water-thupply? You may have food, and you may have liquor, mithter—but what about water?"

I knew nothing about that—but Marjorie did, and she made quick answer.

"There's no shortage of water," she said. "The well's in the back garden, but the pump

is in the house. They can get as much water as they want."

He nodded, as if he now comprehended the whole situation, and going back to his companions, began to talk with them again. As for our unfortunate selves, we sat down in the shelter of a big gorse bush—welcome enough, for it was a hot morning, and the sun was powerful—and watched them.

"Were ever mortals in such a predicament as this?" murmured Marjorie. "Dick!—whatever are we going to do?"

"What are they going to do?" I growled. "I wish to heaven Kiffin and his pal had shot those two young ruffians! Or that somebody'd come. The whole thing's absolutely——"

"Melchisedech's coming back," she said. "He's evidently decided on something."

The Jew came across to us in our shelter. Firm though he was about our detention, and vigilant in keeping an eye on our movements, he was always polite and respectful, and, I think, genuinely sorry that we were placed in such an unpleasant situation.

"Mithter," he said, "we've dethided what we're going to do about thith bithneth. We

ain't the leatht fear of anybody coming along, mithter, and we can afford to wait. Tho we're going to let thingth thlide till nightfall, and then, mithter, we thall have Kiffin and hith pal, whoever he ith, out o' that cottage, quick! Ath you'll thee, mithter. Tho—we mutht make the betht of it."

"You mean we must make the best of it!" said I, angrily. "We're to be shut out, go without our dinner——"

"It'th the fortune o' war, mithter," he interrupted, coolly. "I gueth you've been in far worthe cathe than thith—I have! And ath for your lady, we'll do the betht we can for her. Now, I'm going to thend Greever down to the neareth village for thome thupplieth for ourthelveth, and if you'll jutht write down on a bit o' paper what you'd like, and give him the coin, he'll bring you anything. Get plenty, mithter—he'th a thtrong chap, Greever, and ain't afraid of a weight."

Making the best of a bad job, Marjorie and I consulted, finally scribbling a small list of things on which we could certainly manage to exist until we could regain Colstervine's larder. I gave it and money to Melchisedech and pres-

ently Greever departed. And then afternoon fell on us and the quarry. It was peaceful enough, and we got through it somehow—the three young desperadoes in one camp, ourselves in another; they watched us, we watched them, all of us watched the cottage. Nothing happened. Greever in due time came back, he and his mates supped, so did we on cold tongue and biscuits. Melchisedech once more generously treated us to beer—one glass all round and no more. Dusk began to fall.

And then, all of a sudden, as one says, we heard the sound of creaking wheels. A disreputable-looking tilt-cart, drawn by a skin-and-bone horse, appeared from a corner of the coppice and came lurching like a wind-tossed ship into the quarry. On the fore-board sat a woman whose gay-coloured garments, jet-black snake-like ringlets, and dark flashing eyes proclaimed her a gipsy; at the horse's side strode a tall sinewy fellow who, if not as obviously a gipsy as the woman, had evidently no small strain of gipsy blood.

CHAPTER VII

Zephany Shepperoe

I SUPPOSE that nobody was ever so glad to see anybody as we were to see these strange folk. We looked upon them as men holding a difficult position against overwhelming odds would look on a suddenly arriving and wholly unexpected relief force. We knew nothing about them—we could not estimate anything that would follow on their coming—there might even be developments which would be decidedly unpleasant and disturbing. But this was a diversion, and a welcome one; we were no longer alone with Melchisedech and his gang. And with a mutual consent and understanding we sprang to our feet and went nearer to these invaders of our undesirable privacy.

They, and their equipage, and their belongings, made a queer and bizarre effect against the green-clad walls of the quarry. The gay

patches of colour in the woman's garments—the faded scarlet of the man's waistcoat—his fur cap—her glittering earrings, barbaric in size and shape—the scraggy horse—the tilt-cart, heaped up with such wares as these gipsy hawkers sell—baskets, mats, tin pans and pots, all jingling as the wheels creaked over the uneven turf—these combined to make a picture such as may be seen at most times in spring and summer months on the heaths of Surrey and the Downs of Sussex; it was a touch of caravan life, completed, in this instance, by a nondescript dog, who, tied thereto by a strand of old clothes-line, trotted, with evident unwillingness, at the tail of the cart. Man, woman, horse, dog—four living things. We looked on them, I assure you, as if we had been cast away on a desert island for long, weary years, and at last, with infinite surprise, had set eyes on something other than the arid waste and featureless solitude. All this, to be sure, sprung up in us in the hope that in this nomad huckster and his wife we should find friends—I think that neither of us until that moment had ever realised how eagerly one

snatches at any possibility of friendship where none seems forthcoming.

The cavalcade wheeled round to the left on entering the quarry, making a straight line across the grass-grown surface for a sheltered spot that lay between the cottage and the cliff-like walls. It struck me at once that the man and woman had been there before, and were repairing to a familiar camping ground. But ere the wheels had creaked and the tilt-cart swayed over many yards, Melchisedech and his satellites were on their legs and hurrying across; they came up to the new arrivals on one side as Marjorie and I approached on the other. The man pulled up his horse, and he and the woman looked from the gang to us, and from us to the gang with sharp and questioning glances. And I was thankful to see that in the eyes of both there was that which assured me that they were folk of courage and determination. There was curiosity and puzzled surmise in both dark faces as they were turned on Marjorie and myself, but an obvious lowering and disdain as they calmly inspected the four hang-dog young ruffians who came semi-circling before the horse.

Melchisedech, as usual, stood out in advance of his lieutenants—to give him due credit there was nothing of the craven about him; the air he now adopted was that of calm, but firm expostulation; he might have been a polite, but determined young gamekeeper, about to warn off an unconscious trespasser.

"Good evening, mate," he began, suavely enough. "Wath you and your mithith thinking about camping out in thith old quarry?"

The man thus addressed glanced once more at us—half-quizzically. But his eyes were contemptuous when he turned them on the Jew.

"Thinking about it?" he answered, having previously spat vehemently on the grass at Melchisedech's feet. "No, we ain't thinking about it, me lad!—not nohow. We are going to camp in this quarry, as we done for many a long year, and shall do again, for as long as we like. Who's again it?"

" 'Tain't convenient, mate, on thith occathion," said Melchisedech, firmly. "Thith here quarry ith engaged for the night. We've bithneth here, mate—me and my three palth. We can't do with nobody camping out here. Take a word of advithe, mate—go farther."

The man turned to us. We had come close up to the cart by that time, and I had already noticed the roughly-painted and lettered name-board on its side, just behind the joining of the shafts—"Zephany Shepperoe, Licensed Hawker, Cheam." So now we knew, if not all, at any rate something about the new arrivals —Mr. and Mrs. Shepperoe. And when Mr. Shepperoe turned to us this time he laughed, showing a set of fine white teeth under his dark top lip.

"Strike me if I know what the young blinker means!" said he. "Go farther? Not if I knows it! This here quarry——"

"Hit him one in the jaw, Zeph!" exclaimed Mrs. Shepperoe from the cart. "Put it about him, and go on! I want my tea."

Whether it was that Mr. Shepperoe was accustomed to marital acquiescence in his wife's commands, or that her counsel struck him as being good, I don't know, but at this, he chirruped to the horse and himself moved forward. Whereupon there was a threatening movement on the part of the four objectors, and a closing up of their ranks in front of the cavalcade.

"You ain't going to thtop in thith quarry

to-night, mate!" announced Melchisedech. "We can't have it. Push your horthe round and get out! There'th plenty o' room on the hillthide. Thith quarry'th occupied."

Something of a black flush came over Mr. Shepperoe's naturally dark skin, and a queer and not too pleasant smile began to hover about the corners of his thin lips. Without a word he divested himself of his rough jacket, and having hung it deliberately on the horse's collar, began to turn up his shirt sleeves.

"That's it, Zeph!" said Mrs. Shepperoe, with calm approval. "Give 'em one all round, dearie! They'll not want another," she added, turning her attention to me with a knowing wink. "Hit that big-nosed feller first, Zeph."

Mr. Shepperoe, however, was evidently one of those fighters who believe that a due warning should preface a decisive blow. Revealing an arm that resembled polished mahogany, and a fist as hard as iron, he stepped nearer to the gang, letting out at the same time a mighty bellow.

"Stand clear!"

Then followed precisely what I had been fearing for the last few minutes. Melchis-

edech and his three men drew their ugly-looking bowie-knives, which we had seen in their possession when we shared their bread and cheese. And instead of standing clear they began, cautiously and warily, to creep round the hawker. At my side I heard Marjorie catch her breath . . . as for myself, fascinated, I could not withdraw my eyes from the four evil, murderous faces. But I was conscious that Shepperoe drew back slightly at the sight of that gleaming steel, and suddenly I heard his voice, in no more than a whisper, flung over his shoulder.

"Nance!"

"Right, Zeph! I got it," muttered the woman. "A second, old lad!—now then!"

I was watching Melchisedech as Mrs. Shepperoe spoke, and as she uttered the last two words I saw his naturally pale face turn a sickly green, and a deadly, cowardly fear steal into his eyes. He pulled himself up from his crouching attitude and shrank back, and the others shrank with him, Fakoe to a considerable distance. And glancing round I saw what this had led me to expect—from some recess in the cart behind her, the hawker's wife had drawn

out a highly respectable, breech-loading sporting gun, and she was calmly covering Melchisedech in a very business-like manner.

Shepperoe stepped back, keeping his eye on his assailants. Without relaxing his watch he twisted his right arm and hand round behind him towards the cart.

"Gi'e me the gun, Nance," he murmured.

The four men shrank farther and farther back before the sweep of Shepperoe's levelled weapon. And for the fiftieth time that day I longed for my own revolvers, lying idly far away in Maida Vale, for I realised that if I had had but one of them I should have been able to compel these knife-carrying young scoundrels to anything; of a bullet or a charge of shot they were as frightened as the average hooligan is of the cat-o'-nine-tails. Every man Jack of the four, under Shepperoe's gun, was all of a tremble. But Melchisedech, retreating with the others, made shift to bring up a faint, expostulating smile.

"Put it down, mate!" he said. "We ain't——"

Shepperoe let out another bellow. For a

somewhat slender, though sinewy and wiry man, he possessed a thunderous voice.

"Clear!" he shouted. "Get out!—every mother's son o' ye if ye don't want daylight through yer blarsted carcasses! Nance!—bring out that other gun, old gel!"

I was not sure, then, whether this admonition was a piece of bluff on Mr. Shepperoe's part, or if there really was a second gun amongst his miscellaneous belongings. But as Mrs. Shepperoe turned with great willingness and activity to the things behind her under the tilt, Melchisedech and his friends evidently accepted the warning as equivalent to demonstration; without further waiting they turned tail and fled back to the entrance to the quarry, and Shepperoe, dropping his weapon into the pit of his left arm, twisted round on Marjorie and myself. And I saw then that he was a man of some sense of humour, for he smiled—not altogether wryly.

"I've seen some queer things in my time, master," he remarked, "and so, to be sure, has my old woman there, but blow me if I ever come across the likes o' this! What's it all about, master?—four blood-thirsty young cut-

throats like them yonder, what ought, I should say, to be in Lewes Gaol; and a young lady and gentleman doing—what?"

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Shepperoe, more precise and direct. "What may you be doing here, young gentleman, and your young lady, amongst a lot like that? Knives!"

"You may well ask," said I, "and I can tell you in a few words. That cottage belongs to a friend of ours, Mr. Colstervine——"

"We know Mr. Colstervine," interrupted Mrs. Shepperoe. "Tall fellow, Zeph—we sell him some door-mats and a couple of pans last time we was this way."

"Mr. Colstervine lent his cottage to my wife and myself for a few days," I continued. "We came here yesterday. Last night a man named Kiffin came, very late at night, professing to look for an old friend here. We took him in. This morning, first thing, these fellows, whom you've just seen, arrived after Kiffin. They want him—to murder him, I think. And the long and short of it is, Kiffin's barred and locked himself in the cottage; he won't let us in, these fellows won't let us go away; and here we are, without a roof to our heads!"

Shepperoe, still sticking to his gun, was now leaning against the shafts of his cart. Regarding me whimsically, he tapped the double-barrel.

"From what you say, master," he remarked, "I reckon you ain't got nothing o' this sort about you?"

"No!" said I, "I wish I had!"

He nodded in the direction in which Melchisedech and his gang had gone.

"They ain't, neither?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "Nothing but their knives. But—the man in the cottage—and there may be two men there—he—or they."

"Guns?" he interrupted quickly.

"Revolvers, I think," I said. "They fired on these fellows this morning."

He turned slowly and gave the cottage a long, thoughtful inspection.

"Queer state of things," he muttered at last. "However, there's no doubt more to be told about it. And here we're a-going to camp—gang or no gang. Let's be plain, master—are you and the lady in any danger, yourselves?"

"I don't know about absolute danger," I answered. "We're in a queer position. We

can't get into the cottage. Those fellows won't let us leave the quarry. And night's coming on!"

He laid his hand on the horse's reins and began to move him forward.

"Aye, well, master," he said. "As long as we've got firearms—— But do you and your lady come along of we—they'll not come nigh while they know I've got this gun, and another in the cart."

"You have another in the cart?" I exclaimed joyfully.

"I have so, master," he answered. "And plenty o' cartridges, too—and a couple o' licenses, for that matter. And if you'll accept of a cup o' tea we'll talk while we drink it."

Marjorie, walking at the other side of the cart, was already in close converse with Mrs. Shepperoe; I overheard that good, if somewhat truculent lady make an offer of hospitality simultaneously with her husband. We went along with them to a spot with which they were evidently well acquainted; they showed us there something that we had not previously noticed —a spring of clear, drinkable water. And while one lighted a fire and the other filled a

kettle, I went back to where we had left our own provisions and carried them over to our new acquaintance's camp. As for Melchisedech and his gang, I saw nothing of them on this short excursion—either they had withdrawn into the coppice in front of the quarry or betaken themselves to some quiet spot amongst the bushes to plot further mischief.

For the second time that day we made a picnic meal in strange company. But this time it was with folk who were sympathetic. Mrs. Shepperoe was especially so—her firm advice was that Zeph and myself should take the two guns, stalk that little Jew and his cut-throat associates, and let daylight into all four. But Mr. Shepperoe, to whom by that time we had imparted the whole story in all its details, was for other methods.

"As long as them chaps has nothing but knives, and we've two good guns, master," he remarked, "we've the whip hand of 'em. I know their sort—they'll not run the risk of getting peppered, not they! Careful enough of their own skins they is, however quick they'd be to carve a piece out of a man with them

knives. No—we can tackle them. But the thing is—that cottage!"

"How to regain possession, you mean?" I suggested.

"Not so much that, master, as what's in it," he answered. "Appears from what you and your good lady tells us, there'll be two men in there. And armed. Now what might you suppose they're after?"

"Heaven knows!" said I.

"Aye, just so!" said he. "Only—that don't help us—guesswork that is. Now, says you, this here Kiffin, he tells you that he come here to see if old Dan Flint was still alive. Well, me and my missus there, we remembers old Dan, and a rare old rascal he were! And I shouldn't wonder if there was something in this tale about stolen stuff being put away somewhere round here, for, to my knowledge, old Dan, he was mixed up with a bad lot. And from all you tell me, I'm a-wondering of something."

"Yes—what?" I asked.

"Well, if that there stuff mightn't be in the cottage itself," he said. "Planted, you understand? The place was tumble-down when that

friend o' yourn buyed it; he done it up as you now see it. But—you dunno and I dunno what that there old varmint, Dan Flint, mayn't ha' put away under the old floorings. See?"

"That would certainly account for Kiffin's anxiety to get in, and for his barring us out," I answered.

"It would so, master," he replied. "And if it is so, and if he's another man in with him, and whether he has or no, you can be certain that place is being turned upside down. And the thing now is, what's the best way to circumwent all parties?—them young rascals with their knives, and the old 'uns in the cottage with their pistols? We're between cross-fires, master!"

"We've been that all day," said I. "I don't know what we should have done if you hadn't turned up. But now, as you're armed——"

"Aye?" he broke in, giving me a keen look. "Aye, what then, now?"

"I should suggest that we take a gun apiece, leave the quarry—they daren't stop us while we've guns—and go for the police," I suggested. "We can get plenty of police at Wry-

chester, surely. And they'll come in strength and turn the whole lot out."

To my surprise he shook his head. He glanced at his wife, at Marjorie, and at me, and there was a knowing smile in his eyes.

"No, master!" he answered. "We'll not do that. To start with, for all that we have them guns, those chaps, if they saw we were bent on going, 'ud put up some sort of a fight, and the women might—I says might, mind you—they might get hurt. We can do better than that, master. Brains, master, brains!—that's better nor guns. And we don't want no fight—bloody fight, anyhow—if we can help it. What we want is circumwention, circumwention! A good word that, master."

"His fav'rite word!" observed Mrs. Shepperoe, aside, to Marjorie. "Dunno what it means, but 'tis allers on the end of his tongue. Circumwention!"

"Well?" I asked. "How are we going to circumvent 'em?"

He turned on his elbow—we were all perched on the turf around the stick-fire on the sheltered side of the cart—and pointed to the dog, which

was still attached to the tail-board by the bit of old clothes-line.

"You see that there dog, master," he answered. "Well, I gets him this very afternoon for nothing at a farm t'other side o' this range of hills—not so far off, neither, matter o' three or four mile. They'd tried him with sheep, and he's no good. They was going to shoot him, so me and the missus, we begged him. And never thinking how uncommon useful he'd come in this very night. But he will! And how, says you? This way, master. I reckon you're a scholard. Likely you've pencil and paper on you; if you haven't, we have, there in the cart. Write a letter, mister, setting out that you and your missus, and Zeph Shepperoe and his, is all in deadly peril at Flint's Quarry, and begging the reader to send police and other men—armed—at once. Then, as soon as it's dark, we ties it secure round that there dog's neck, and lets him go. And he will go—straight and sharp to where we got him!"

CHAPTER VIII

Embassy of Melchisedech

I LOOKED round again at the proposed messenger. He was a nondescript animal; you could not take him for anything but a mongrel. There was something of the collie in him. What the rest of him was it was not easy to make out, but it was obvious that he was the offspring of a serious misalliance. While we supped Shepperoe had kept throwing him scraps of food; finally, Mrs. Shepperoe had flung him the remains of a shoulder blade of mutton, on which she and her lord had been feasting. He was busy with this now, but ever and anon he manifested interest in the entrance to the quarry, as if, hospitably as he was being treated, he had desires for what lay beyond. And clearly enough, he possessed a roving eye.

"You think he'd go straight back to the place where you got him?" I asked.

"Make a bee-line for it, that critter, master,"

affirmed the hawker. "'Cause why? Born and bred there; ain't never seen no other. He's p'ints, has that dog, on'y they don't lie in the direction of sheep. The man what I begged him of, he says as how sheep ain't in that dog's line; he don't seem to take no proper interest in 'em. So, as I say, they was going to get rid of him. And us, being just now without a dog to run under the cart, as is proper, we begs him. A few days with us, and he'd ha' settled down. But, as things is, he'll go straight back to his old master if I lets him loose."

"And his master is—who and what?" I asked.

"Hind—foreman—on this here farm I'm talking about," he answered. "Sheep farm on them Downs. And, of course, a dog what don't take no interest in sheep, he ain't no good on a farm o' that sort—don't earn his vittals."

A sudden notion, a vague hope, came to me.

"A sheep farm!" said I. "You don't happen to know the name of the farmer?"

"I do, then, master," he replied. "Big Scotch chap he is; seen him a time or two when we come this round. Macpherson his name is; come and took his farm a while ago. I dunno

how many thousands o' sheep he ain't got roaming around these hills."

It was just light enough for Marjorie and myself to exchange an understanding glance.

"This is a direct intervention of Providence, Shepperoe!" I said. "We know something about Mr. Macpherson; he's a friend, or, at any rate, an acquaintance of Mr. Colstervine's. Now, if only that dog really will go straight back——"

"I'll warrant him for that!" declared the hawker. "First dog as never did, if he don't, anyhow, master!"

"It's their natur'," remarked Mrs. Shepperoe, bending confidentially towards Marjorie. "Home feelings! Same as cats."

"How can we fasten a letter on him—so that it'll easily be seen?" I asked.

"Write you your letter, master," answered Shepperoe. "I'll see to the rest. And if you ain't got 'em on you, here's paper and here's envelopes."

He went over to his cart and came back with some cheap stationery and a square of board to serve as a desk. And thereupon I wrote a plain and concise letter to Mr. Mac-

pherson, telling him of our predicament, and of the present exact situation, and begging him to get whatever help he considered necessary, whether of police or his own men, and come speedily to our assistance. That done, the hawker—who in this, as in other matters, soon made it clear to us that he was a person of ingenuity and inventive power—fastened the missive around the dog's neck in such a fashion that it could neither slip off nor be torn off, and completed the operation by tying over the fastenings a gay-coloured handkerchief which he took from his own throat.

"There, master!" he remarked, evidently highly satisfied with his arrangements. "That's the manner and notion of it, d'ye see? Home he goes, that there dog, and the first thing they notices, after their natural surprise at seeing of him again, is that there bit of a neckcloth of mine. And they takes it off of him. And then they sees the letter. 'What's this here?' says they. 'A letter—for Mr. Macpherson!' And, in course, they deliver it. And—there you are! Quicker nor post-office work that, master. And now we've nothing to

do but wait till it's come back. Then—away he goes!"

I glanced in the direction of the entrance to the quarry. We could see nothing of the gang, but I knew that they would be lurking about, watchful as ever.

"I hope those fellows up there won't interfere with him," I said. "If they noticed him slipping away——"

"They'll not do that, master," he answered. "We'll let it settle down to-night. Moonlight it is just now, to be sure, o' nights—but the moon won't be over the top o' them trees before ten o'clock, and till it rises it'll be dark enough in this quarry. Them fellers'll never see that dog, master—he'll be off and away without 'em knowing of it."

"That's all right then," said I. "But—I wish we knew what they were going to do. They'll not leave here as long as Kiffin's in that cottage."

The hawker made no reply to this for some minutes. He had filled and lighted a well-blackened, stumpy clay pipe, and now, having fixed up our message on the dog, he lay at full length by his fire, while Mrs. Shepperoe

washed up her plates and dishes, and generally made things tidy. Marjorie and I watched Shepperoe with curiosity, wondering what he was thinking about.

"Aye, well, master," he said at last, after much evident cogitation. "I dunno how a gentleman like you feels about it, but I ain't partic'ly concerned about rubbish like them fellows! If so be as we hadn't got my two guns, they'd be mighty unpleasant company with them knives, and in a way o' speaking they'd have us at their mercy. But we have the guns!—and they'll not interfere with us. I know their sort, master!—There's two things they're mortal afraid of—a bit o' lead, and a cat-o'-nine-tails! I could keep fifty of 'em off as long as I've got a gun. No!—what I'm thinking and figuring about is—what's going on in that cottage? What's this here Kiffin—and t'other man—what are they up to?"

"I suppose they daren't come out—while those fellows are hanging round," I suggested.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "'Tain't that, neither. According to what you says, master, about what happened when t'other tried to stave the door in this morning, them

chaps inside the cottage is armed—revolvers, eh? Well, in that case they can walk out whenever they like. A couple o' men with revolvers can walk scot-free through twenty without! No, 'tain't that!"

"What is it then?" demanded Marjorie. "What's your notion?"

"Well, ma'am," he answered, with leisurely consideration. "I ain't so sure that it ain't got to do with old Dan Flint. Now, me and my missus, we been coming round this here country, now and again, summer-time, a-selling our stuff, for a many years, and we've camped out in this here old quarry I dunno how often. And we knew old Dan Flint. He was a main bad 'un! My notion is that old Dan Flint he was by way o' being a fence—a man what took in stolen goods. Sure and certain I am that he was in with a bad lot, as used to come around here—what could be quieter and more retiring, as you'd say? And I think this here Kiffin, he's likely what you says that Jew feller told you about him—he's an old lag, what knows that there's stolen property hidden away here, and ain't had a chance o' getting at it before. And, in my opinion, 'tis in that cottage.

Which, as I says, previous, we knew before ever that London friend o' yours bought it. 'Twas a main tumble-down, ramshackle old place when he laid out his money on it, sure-ly! He done it up from ground to roof-tree—but Lord bless 'ee, considering as that old varmint, Dan Flint, live in it before that, you don't know what there is under it. And 'tis my opinion them fellers is looking for what there may be, or what they know there is. And when they get what they want—if they do—out they comes! Armed, master!"

"And what then?" I inquired.

"Aye, what then?" said he, with an enigmatic smile. "That, master, is the question? For we don't want no bloodshed. 'Twould be the easiest thing in the world, we having a couple of guns, to put up a fight wi' 'em. But when bullets and shots gets flying about things comes dangerous, and I reckon you don't want your good lady to run no risks, and I cert'ny ain't done with my old woman there—her's over good a mate for that! No, master—as I says before—circumwention! That's the ticket! Circumwention!"

"Then we're to do—what?" I asked. "You're such a clever chap——"

"Yes, ain't he the brain-piece on him!" exclaimed Mrs. Shepperoe, admiringly. "Allers had, and will have for ever!"

"Such a clever chap that I'll leave it in your hands," I continued. "What do we do now?"

"What we want to do, master, having a couple o' women—and our own skins—on our hands," he answered, "is to sit tight and take care of ourselves—till the help comes that that there dog's presently going to call. They'll not touch us, while we've them guns, I says again. We sits here—and spectates. Same as you do when you goes to the theayter. We lets them—that lot up there and them two in the cottage—do the acting, and we sits by and watches. That's better."

"Well, supposing that the dog goes straight to his old home, and Macpherson gets the letter," I said. "How soon may we expect things to happen?—help to come?"

"Somewhere before sunrise," he replied, with cool confidence. "Macpherson has a lot o' men on his farm, and he'll know how to get police, too. So—we just waits."

"I wish there was some shelter," I remarked, with a glance at Marjorie, who was somewhat lightly clad. "The day's been hot enough, but the nights are cold."

"Don't you go for to concern yourself about that, master," said the hawker. "Me and my old woman'll see your good lady's all right. Let's get this here dog started, when it gets a bit darker, and then you'll see our arrangements. We takes the goods out o' the cart; we rigs up a nice comfortable little nest under the tilt, and we've enough o' clean rugs and blankets for the King hisself. The women can sit in there—and as for you and me, master, well, I reckon we'll keep a gun apiece handy, and do a bit o' sentry work. I've no doubt you've spent worse nights?"

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Shepperoe," said Marjorie. "You're a very resourceful man!"

The hawker laughed, evidently very pleased with the compliment.

"Folks what lives this sort o' life, ma'am," he remarked, "has, nat'rally, to keep their wits about 'em. Life under the sun and moon ain't what it is under ceilings and roofs! And which

is best, I know! We goes into our house for the winter, and a rare nice house it is, too—but Lord bless 'ee, as soon as the birds begins to sing again, and the new green comes, we're on the road again, breathing free, as you never can do inside o' four walls!"

"'Tis in our blood, d'ye see?" said Mrs. Shepperoe apologetically.

"Aye, and bone, too!" said her husband. "And heart and eyes, and all the rest on't—may I never die in a bed, master!"

Then, glancing round at the darkening quarry and the gathering night, he remarked that we might as well let the dog go about his business, and handing over to me the gun, which he had until then kept close beside him, he went across to the cart and untied the bit of old clothes-line by which our all-important messenger was secured. Up to that moment I had been somewhat doubtful as to whether the dog would go away—the hawker and his wife had fed him well enough while they ate their own supper, and I rather fancied that their attentions would induce him to stop with them. But at a word from Shepperoe he went off, hesitated a second or two within the circle

of light from the stick fire, and then, turning tail on us, shot away into the night, straight for the mouth of the quarry.

"He's off!" said the hawker, with a satisfied laugh. "He'll make a line for the old spot. And now, master, do you stand by that gun while me and the missus does a bit o' preparation. If you see or hears anything o' them fellers up there—but you'll know what to do well enough."

I mounted guard, with the gun in my left arm, while Shepperoe and his wife began to unload their cart and prepare a shelter for the night. Marjorie, to whom Mrs. Shepperoe had already lent a shawl of many colours, walked up and down at my side. Everything was very still, but for the slight rattle of the pots and pans which our new friends were piling up on the turf; we might have thought, indeed, that apart from our own presence in it, the quarry was deserted. We heard nothing whatever of Melchisedech and his men; there was not a gleam of light from the cottage. But, to be sure, the shutters, with which Colstervine had supplied every window, were well-made and close fitting; that Kiffin and his pal

were within and at work on some nefarious task or other, I had no doubt.

"Dick!" whispered Marjorie, as we moved up and down in the darkness, eyes and ears on the stretch. "Do you think that message will really bring help?"

"It'll bring help if it gets to Macpherson," I answered. "It's—if!"

"Is there any reason why it shouldn't?" she asked.

"There's one danger I've thought of," said I. "I mean, to the dog."

"What?" she exclaimed.

"He's a considerable stretch of country to cover," I replied. "Three or four miles, Shepperoe said. There'll be gamekeepers about, probably. And gamekeepers have a nasty trick of shooting stray dogs."

"Even then, somebody would find the message," she remarked. "I'd be sorry for the poor dog, but the message is——"

"The message will get somewhere all right," said I. "It's a question of time. My own impression is that we shall see developments here before morning."

"There's the moon!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Look! Through those pines!"

The moon, nearing its full, was just rising above the eastern edge of the quarry, behind a network of feathery branches. But before we had time to admire the transformation which its silvery radiance threw across the scenes about us, a low warning whistle from the hawker brought me sharply to attention. Twenty yards away, amongst the gorse bushes, a figure was cautiously advancing upon us.

"Halt! Who goes there?" I shouted. "Stand, now!"

The figure became motionless. There was nothing but head and shoulders to be seen of it, and the moonlight, still obscured by the trees and scudding wisps of cloud, was not yet sufficiently clear to enable me to identify the face which peered at us from beyond a protecting clump of gorse. But Marjorie's eyes were quicker.

"Melchisedech!" she murmured. "That's his hat."

I was not at a loss to understand Melchisedech's presence. He had come on a diplomatic mission—precisely what he would do,

and what I had been expecting. And having a gun all ready for him, and without waiting to consult Shepperoe, I called across the intervening space.

"If that's you, Melchisedech, and you're alone, come out into the open and halt at ten paces," I said in my best commanding manner. "No tricks, my lad, if you don't want soundly peppering! Now," I continued, as he promptly emerged upon an open stretch of turf, "what is it?"

The moon just then topped the belt of pines, and we saw Melchisedech clearly. His attitude was placatory, not to say cringing. Evidently, he was chastened.

"Mithter!" he said, in his most wheedling accents. "Mithter! You ain't a-going to dethert your old palth, are you, mithter?"

I heard the hawker and his wife, busy with their belongings, chuckle as if with infinite pleasure—the sound did credit to their sense of humour. Marjorie laughed, too. But I purposely put a lot of sternness into my reply.

"Desert you!" I exclaimed. "What the deuce do you mean? What have I got to do with you and your pack?"

"But we wath getting on like a houthe afire, mithter!" he said, throwing a wealth of injured innocence into his expostulation. "We felt you thympathithed with uth, mithter!—you and your good lady. You know how ill-uthed uth poor fellowth hath been, mithter—don't you, now? I athkth you thtraight, mithter!—ain't we?"

"What do you want?" I demanded, with feigned asperity. "Out with it!"

"Don't thpeak rough to a poor fellow that'th on'y trying to get hith own back, mithter!" he pleaded. "We've had pleathantneth all the day, ain't we? Let'th keep it up to the end! Can't we—can't we come to thome arrangement? Uth, and you, and the gentleman with the horthe and cart? Friendly, like?"

"What arrangement?" I asked.

"Well, mithter, thomething in the tharing line," he replied. "It'th like thith here, mithter. Kiffin, and whoever it ith that'th with him, they can't get away, nohow; they're bottled! Now, mithter, if you and that gentleman came in with uth, d'ye thee, there'd be thix of uth inthtead of four, now, and you've got a gun——"

"Two, me lad! and plenty o' stuff to put

in 'em, let me tell you!" shouted Shepperoe, from behind his cart. "One for me, and one for the captain there, which he's got his on him as you see. And mine's here!"

He held up the second gun in the moonlight; its bright parts gleamed refreshingly.

But Melchisedech was not abashed.

"That mak'th thingth all the better, mithter, for what I thuggetht," he replied, coolly. "Come in with uth—you and your gunth—and we'll thettle Kiffin. And then we'll go thareth at the thwag. Ain't it a noble offer, mithterth? For the thwag'th—there!"

He pointed to the cottage, now clear and outstanding in the moonlight. I turned to the hawker.

"Well, Shepperoe?" I said. "Are we to join this enterprising gentleman, and take his noble offer? What's your answer?"

The answer came without any delay. Shepperoe suddenly laid down the pans he was handling, picked up his second gun once more, and bringing it smartly to his shoulder, swung round on the ambassador. At the sight, Melchisedech dived promptly and headlong into the bushes.

CHAPTER IX

The Midnight Cry

THE Jew's disappearance into his wholly inadequate shelter was so hasty and undignified that we all burst into hearty laughter. And the sound of it seemed to reassure and cheer him, for presently his head bobbed up again behind the bushes at a point somewhat farther off.

"Put it down, mithter!" he said, ingratiatingly. "Put it down! There ain't no occathon for them trickth. I don't mean no harm—and I ain't thaid all I wanted to thay, neither."

"What do you want to say?" I demanded, as Shepperoe laid his gun back against the cart. "Get it said, anyway."

"Well, mither," he answered, edging a little nearer again in his eagerness. "Thith here—and I'm thure you'll thee the reathonableneth of it, mithter, knowing what you and your good lady knowth, even if the gentleman with the

cart don't. It'th thith—you know what we want out o' Kiffin? He'th thtolen our bit o' money, and now he'th trying to cheat uth out of our thare o' that thwag. Now, mithterth, both of you—I want to put it to you, friendly. It'th night, and the time'th getting on, and we ain't going to meth about with Kiffin any longer! We're going into action, mithterth! —we're going to be into that cottage, one way or another, and we'll either have what we want out o' Kiffin or we'll put him through it, proper! Now, mithterth, oneth more, you won't come in with uth? On mutual profitth, now?"

"No!" I shouted. "And that's that."

Melchisedech uttered a doubtful sound—whether of joy or sorrow it was difficult to make out.

"Very well, then, mithter," he continued, coming still nearer. "Then thith ith what I want to thay. Ath you won't take a hand in the bithneth, of courthe you won't go for to thide with Kiffin—what?"

"Side with Kiffin!" I exclaimed. "We're not likely to side with anybody!"

This time there was no mistaking the grati-

fication in Melchisedech's deep sigh. Plainly, he felt greatly relieved about something.

"That'th prethithely what I wanted you to thay, mithter," he answered joyfully. "And it'th what I expected of a gentleman. Then—you'll pretherve a thrict neutrality, mithter?—you and the gentleman with the cart? You won't interfere with uth when we go for Kiffin and that cottage? That'th it, ithn't it, mithter?"

A sudden remembrance of my obligations to Colstervine emboldened me to an almost swaggering defiance, and I spoke without troubling to consult either the Shepperoes or Marjorie.

"Look you here, Master Melchisedech!" said I. "I'll just tell you what it is. That cottage belongs to my friend Mr. Colstervine, and I'm in charge of it. If you and your pals go near it, you'll be sorry! Shepperoe and I have got what you haven't—a couple of good shot-guns. We've also got a fine supply of number twelve cartridges. So we're better equipped than you are. Now listen—if you and your gang go near that cottage, you'll get peppered!—if not worse. Take that in, Melchisedech—it's my ultimatum."

"That's the way to talk to 'em!" observed Mrs. Shepperoe, in my rear. "That's what they understands. Plain language!"

A brief silence followed, during which Melchisedech seemed to be consulting the moon. "Got that, Melchisedech?" I asked at last. "Shall I put it more plainly?"

He turned then from the moon to me.

"I'm thorry you uthe wordth like them, mithter," he said, in his best deprecating manner. "I didn't eckthpect you'd treat uth in that way—poor fellerth that'th been already treated uncommon cruel and on'y wantth their own back. If you'd conthent to talk it over, reathonable, mithter——? You thee——"

"Melchisedech!" I broke in on him, severely. "If you and your pals attempt to break into Mr. Colstervine's cottage, or to damage it in any way, Shepperoe and I shall open fire on you! That's flat!"

"Without notice!" added Shepperoe.

Melchisedech wavered.

"You mean that, mithter?" he asked anxiously. "You ain't bluffing uth!"

Marjorie pulled the tail of my jacket.

"Dick!" she whispered. "The other three are behind him—in the bushes!"

But I knew that already. I had been keeping my eyes skinned during the second stage of Melchisedech's embassy and had seen that Greever and Dex and Fakoe had crept, crawled, sneaked somehow close up in rear of their leader.

"There's no bluff, Melchisedech!" I answered, slightly raising my voice. "Listen again!—the whole lot of you, for I see you're all there. Go near that cottage, and you'll feel some of this shot rattling about your carcasses! And now be off!—take my advice and go right away—go home. This game's up! Shepperoe!"

The hawker knew what I meant, and his gun was up to his shoulder on the instant. There was a scuffling in the bushes at the sight of it, and the sound of a hasty withdrawal. But the Jew, knowing now that all attempts at diplomacy had failed, threw back a menace, stripped of any pretence.

"All right, mithter!" he exclaimed. "But if you ain't with uth, you're with them, and if you're on their thide you're not on ourth. Tho

we'll take our own courthe, mithter—we ain't come to the end o' what we can do. And let that hawker chap look to hiththself! If we don't cook hith goothe for him now we thall drop acroth him and hith mithith thome time, and—Fakoe! you blarthed fool, what you a-doing of?"

A knife—flung with a precision that made me wonder if Fakoe had ever exercised his abilities in knife-throwing on the professional stage—flashed like an arrow between me and Shepperoe, sung merrily as it narrowly missed the two women behind us, and stuck itself with a savage thud in the woodwork of the cart. And simultaneously with that thud came the crack of the hawker's shot-gun, followed immediately by that of mine. One of the four scurrying young scoundrels screamed—the scream, no louder than that of a hunted rabbit, was lost at once in the beat of their feet as they raced away through the bushes towards the end of the quarry. An instant later the gang had disappeared—and in the ensuing silence I heard Mrs. Shepperoe make a queer sort of gurgling sound in her throat, and Marjorie

catching her breath. As for Shepperoe, he swore quietly.

I flung out the used cartridges—conscious of a most unholy feeling of joy at the smell of powder. And I laughed.

"Shepperoe!" I said. "We missed 'em!"

He made no immediate reply to that—instead, walking over to the cart, he pulled out the knife, and in the flare of the naphtha lamp which he had lighted and hung up on the tilt, some little time previously, he silently invited our attention to it. And I saw at once that this was not one of the bowie-knives with which Marjorie and I knew Melchisedech and the gang to be furnished—this thing was a long, thin bit of steel, stiletto-like in shape, ground to a razor-like edge on both sides the blade, and venomous in appearance as the young ruffian that flung it. It made me momentarily sick as I thought of that knife, thrown with no ordinary force, driving its way. . . .

"Master!" said Shepperoe, gravely. "That 'ud ha' been kingdom come for whoever had got in the way on't! And—it might ha' bin your young missus, and it might ha' bin my old woman. And——"

He suddenly caught up his gun again and made a determined stride in the direction in which Melchisedech and the others had scurried off. But Mrs. Shepperoe caught at his arm.

"Don't 'ee, Zeph, my dear!" she exclaimed. "Don't 'ee, now! No harm be done!—do 'ee bide here and see what comes next! 'Tis best, Zeph!"

"Mrs. Sheppereo's right," said I. "We shall do no good, Shepperoe, by going after them. They'll not come down here again—after this. And I've an idea."

"What?" he demanded, gloomily, and evidently not too well pleased to be interfered with. "What might that be, now?"

"If there's anybody about on these hills," I replied, "the sound of those shots will attract notice. Somebody may come. In the meantime——"

"Aye!" he said. "There's something in that. There's generally a keeper or two about, midnights, down in them woods, at the bottom. And in the meantime——"

He laid down his gun again, and motioning to his wife to assist him, went on with his preparations for converting the tilt of the cart

into a sort of tent. Marjorie and I drew apart from them. We looked at each other. The moon was shining bright and full into the quarry, and somewhere amongst the pine trees on its edge a nightingale was pouring its heart out. I felt Marjorie shiver.

"Dick!" she whispered. "That knife! It was within an inch—of you!"

"And not so far off you!" I muttered between my teeth. "And then Shepperoe and I hit none of 'em. Damn!"

"One of them screamed," she said.

"They scream at a touch," said I. "Grazed, perhaps. I wish I'd blown that young devil's head off!"

"What'll come next?" she asked. "They mean mischief, yet."

"I don't think they'll come back, now," I answered. "They know we're not to be played with. Look here!—you must get some rest. These people are kindly folk: you'll have to make the best of things in that tent they're rigging up, you and Mrs. Shepperoe. Shepperoe and I'll watch. And I hope the dog's got through. Then we shall get our cottage back."

We both turned and looked at the cottage. It was so silent, so destitute of any light in door or window, that it might have been tenantless, deserted. Yet we knew well enough that there were things going on in there.

"Listen to that nightingale!" said Marjorie suddenly. "And what moonlight! If only all this hadn't happened——"

"The worst of it is that it's happened and is still happening," said I, more concerned with the actually pertinent matters than with moonlight or nightingales. "Even now we're in a nice mess, and I'm not so much bothered about ourselves as about Colstervine's cottage. I had a look round, outside, when you were talking to Mrs. Squeech last night—which seems ages ago—and I noticed that in that lean-to shed, that joins on to the kitchen, there's a tremendous lot of dried wood—fire-wood, and logs, and that sort of thing—that Colstervine evidently had stored there, to say nothing of a lot of coal. And that's not all: there's a barrel of petroleum there!"

"And the house itself is half wood!" she exclaimed. "But—do you think they'd go to that length?"

"You heard what Melchisedech said, just before Fakoe flung that knife?" I replied. "That they hadn't come to the end of what they could do? I've been afraid of their setting fire to the place all along."

"How would that benefit them?" she asked.

"It would smoke out Kiffin, and whoever it is that's with him," said I. "And then they'd lay hands on Kiffin. Revenge on him is what they're so keen about—keener, no doubt, than about their money."

Shepperoe called to us just then, and we went back to the tilt, where, with considerable pride, he showed us the comfortable arrangements he and Mrs. Shepperoe had made.

"Let my old woman see to your good lady, now, master," he said. "They'll be as warm and snug in there as if they were safe in a four-poster with silk curtains! And as for you and me——"

He waited until the women had retired within the tilt, and then, going over to his cart, he rummaged about amongst its varied contents, presently returning to me with a black bottle, a couple of glasses, and a can of spring

water. He held the bottle up against the moon.

"Rum!" he said. "Rum, master—real old Jamaica. None o' your cheap, new stuff; this is the genuine article. And we shall be none the worse of a drop."

He mixed rum and water for both of us; with our glasses in our hands, and the shot-guns conveniently disposed, we perched ourselves as comfortably as possible on some boxes that he had arranged against the side of the cart; the tilt was a little to our left; the cottage some sixty yards away in front to our right. He had already lent me a rough, but warm and wind-proof great-coat, and as the night was balmy and the air soft, I felt no difficulty about facing a vigil. I had, indeed, faced and gone through far worse, and Shepperoe, perhaps, realised what my thoughts were on that point, for he suddenly turned to me with a sympathetic grin.

"Worse nights than this in the trenches, eh, master?" he said. "We ain't up to our knees in mud, nor wet through for t'other half of us, anyway. But—consarn me if I wouldn't

rather hear a shell coming along than a knife whistling past my lug!"

"Murderous!" said I.

"A gallows-bird, that chap!" he commented. "The wood's made that he'll swing from, that! And the women! 'Twarn't half-a-foot off either on 'em, standing close together as they was. Turned me sick, master!"

"Me, too," said I. "I wish we'd fired a bit more carefully."

"Well," he remarked, reflectively. "One of 'em's got a pellet or two in him, and that'll not give him any comfort, and it'll be a warning to t'others. I know their sort!—and 'tis my belief, master, as how they'll clear off."

"I'm not so sure," I replied. And I went on to tell him about the stuff that was stored away in the shed adjoining the kitchen, and of my idea as to what Melchisedech and his gang might do with the idea of forcing out the occupants of the cottage. He shook his head.

"Aye!" he muttered. "There is that in it, to be sure. They might get at 'em in that way, and in the smoke and flame reckon on getting away themselves. But before long I'll just take a cast round and see if I can find out where

they've sneaked off; when you're engaged in warfare, master, it's more than three-quarters of the game to know where your enemy is. And I'm used to night-work, and can see and hear things that another man 'ud let slip."

We continued talking in low tones for some time, comforting ourselves with the rum and our pipes. At last Shepperoe, after pointing upwards to the moon, knocked the ashes out of his black clay and showed signs of stirring.

"There's a big bank o' cloud coming along, master," he remarked. "I'll slip away amongst this gorse and up the quarry and see what I can find out. While I'm off, do you keep your eyes skinned! Do a bit o' sentry work around here—in front of the tilt—keep the women safe."

"I'll see to that," I assured him. "But—yourself? Fellows that can throw knives, you know?"

"Ah, I don't suppose there's another o' them!" he said. "That was a bit o' something special. But I'll see to myself, master—I ain't afraid. And if I've occasion to let this here old gun off this time, I shall do it careful."

He pulled his old hat over his eyes, picked

up his gun, and slipped away silently into the bushes. He must have had a tread as velvet-like as a cat's, for though I listened intently, I heard nothing of his going, no grating of his feet on the stones that cropped out among the herbage, no cracking of a dried twig, no rustling of a branch. Within a moment of his going the silence was profound, and although there were two living beings within a yard or so of me, I felt as if I had been suddenly plunged into intense solitude.

With Shepperoe's second shot-gun in the crook of my left arm I began to do sentry-go in front of the tilt. This canvas-topped erection had been set up at the end of the cart; the boxes and cases which carried the hawker's goods were ranged, sand-bag fashion, along its sides; each end was protected by a stout tarpaulin which acted as curtain; it was certainly a highly ingenious arrangement, and when carpeted with mats and rugs and furnished with mattresses and blankets made a retreat at which even the luxuriously-inclined would have found no need to grumble. Starting out on my patrol before the front, I paused once to listen at the crack of the tarpaulin—and without any

straining of my ears I heard Marjorie's soft, regular breathing, and above it, a distinct and equally regular snoring from Mrs. Shepperoe. So they were all right—and as I turned away again, to pace up and down, the nightingale in the pine trees, that had been silent for the last hour, suddenly woke to the charm of the moon, now once more free of cloud, and made the quarry alive with melody.

Shepperoe came back—slipping out of the tall gorse bushes as silently as he had entered them. He set his gun against the side of the cart, and turning to me, wagged his head—reassuringly.

"Not a sign, nor a sound of 'em, master," he whispered. "I been all round the end o' the quarry there—where you come into it, and where they was hanging out, and I neither see nor hear 'em. But I see a couple o' empty jars, what, from the smell of 'em, I reckon to have had beer in 'em. Likewise I see scraps o' bread and cheese lying about. And in my opinion, they've considered the game's up, and they're——"

He paused, abruptly. From somewhere near the mouth of the quarry, sounds broke the

stillness. One, a shout, sudden and surprised; the other, an equally sudden scream. Then silence again. And with a mutual understanding we seized on our guns, and ran, side by side, across the open space, and through the tunnel-like entrance towards the coppice that faced it. We went more cautiously there—to pull ourselves up and handle our weapons as we rounded the corner. And there, for a second, we stood. There was a patch of shadowy open ground before us, and on it, faces downward, lay two men, still as a fallen tree that stretched itself close by.

CHAPTER X

Ambushed

I HEARD Shepperoe catch his breath, quickly, as we came in sight of those two motionless figures, and I knew what this sound signified. The men were so still, so utterly without sign of life, that already he thought them dead. And so, indeed, did I—but at that very instant there was a faint sigh or moan from one, and a little stirring of his limbs, and we ran forward and looked closer in the light of the moon. The man, who was coming round, turned over slightly, and the moonbeams shone full on his face. At that the hawker let out a sharp exclamation.

"Lord ha' mussy, if 'tain't young Bowler, keeper to Mr. Pellanty's!" he said in tones that suggested sheer amazement. "And him never wi'out his gun! And that'll be his dad—old Bowler, as they do call him. And never did I set eyes on him wi'out his gun, neither, master!

—this here be the work o' them young cut-throats!—and if so be as Bowler and his son did have their guns wi' 'em—and they would! —then them devils has got 'em, and there'll be hell to pay!"

He looked round, anxious and suspicious, at the dark coppice. But the younger of the two men was reviving, and vacantly, with a deep groan, he started up on one elbow and stared wildly around him. His awakening senses took in Shepperoe, and he shrank back, groaning afresh.

"I—I didn't think as you'd ha' gone for to do this, Shepperoe!" he moaned reproachfully. "We ain't had nothing again you, and——"

"Ain't me, not us, Bowler!" interrupted the hawker. "Put it away from yer! This here gentleman and me, we hears cries, screams, like, and we come running up along to see what 'twas as had happened. And we finds—yer. Who done it? And the old man—lordy, they ain't done for him, has they? He lie there that still——"

Young Bowler groaned again, struggled to a sitting posture, and after shaking his head

once or twice, turned over and gripped his father's shoulder.

"I dunno rightly how 'twas, hawker," he answered, dully. "We hear a couple o' shots somewheres up here, a while ago, and we come up, thinking it med be poachers in this here coppice—young pheasant chicks is in there. But we didn't see nothing, nor hear nothing, and we sits down on that old tree stump to smoke our pipes, and then, all sudden-like, I just catches a sound behind me, and 'fore I could so much as turn, I gets a crack across my crown as stretches me out! And didn't know no more after that—till I sees you. And I reckon they give poor old father one o' them, too—here, father!"

Shepperoe dived a hand into the capacious pocket of his coat and pulled out his rum bottle. With difficulty we got old Bowler—a grey-haired veteran—into a sitting posture and forced a little of the rum between his lips, after which, pouring some of the spirit into the palm of my left hand, I proceeded to bathe his forehead. There was a fine contusion on that, stretching from over his right eyebrow to above his ear; I could feel it still swelling. But there

was a hard, granite-like skull under the grizzled hair, and old Bowler began to cough and splutter and show signs of life. The hawker turned to young Bowler.

"Where be your guns, Bowler?" he asked in a low voice. "You'd have they with ye?"

Young Bowler rubbed his head again and stared about him, helplessly.

"Lying there atween us, they was," he answered at last. "Gone!"

"Aye, to be sure!" muttered Shepperoe. "Gone they be! And—ye'd have cartridges?"

Young Bowler clapped a hand to the skirts of his velveteen coat. Then, his faculties being now in a good state of recovery, he thrust his fingers into a like receptacle in his father's skirts, and drew them out, empty.

"Gone!" he said. "Ain't one left. Guns and cartridges!"

"That's what they blaggards was after," growled Shepperoe. "They watched you. How many cartridges might you be carrying, atween you, mate?"

Young Bowler worked his face into strange contortions in his effort to think.

"Dunno, rightly," he replied. "Mebbe a dozen apiece."

"More than enough," muttered Shepperoe. He turned to me and the old man. "How be th' old chap going on now, master? If so be as we could get him down to the cart, my old woman she've a powerful way o' dealing with them complaints, her've got a ointment as 'ud draw a ten-inch nail out of a oak plank. Can 'ee walk a bit now, Master Bowler, like? And how do 'ee feel, my poor dear?"

Old Bowler, under my ministrations, was rapidly reviving. I gave him another mouthful of neat rum, and at last he opened his eyes, gave a twinkling glance round about him, and spoke.

"Bill?" he said.

"Hullo, father?" answered young Bowler. "Here I be, father!"

"What be matter, Bill?" demanded old Bowler. "I do feel same as if I were that 'mazed! And who be this here?—doctor, I reckon. And t'other?—oh, I see who that be! Hawker Shepperoe, for dead sure. What be going on, Shepperoe lad, then?"

"Matter is that you and your Bill here's

suffered a misfortune, Master Bowler," responded the hawker. "You been cracked on the head, unbeknownst like, and 'twas a good job this here young gentleman and me hear you sing out and come up. But you've a-lost your guns and your cartridges, Master Bowler; there's been a pack o' scoundrels at you."

Old Bowler winked and twinkled his beady eyes a little more, and then, following his son's example, began a vigorous shaking of his head. And presently he let out one word, and repeated it with emphasis.

"Powchers!" he said. "Powchers!"

And making a mighty effort, and clinging to my arm, he struggled to his feet and stood, swaying a little, to cast keen, sweeping glances around him and across the broad stretches of moonlit hillside. He was a little wiry fellow, nearer seventy than sixty years, as I guessed, with the keen, watchful face of a woodcraft man; over it, as he presently turned on us, came a shade of chagrin.

"Never been done afore like that in all my time!" he murmured. "Bill, lad, they done us fair and square! And they guns and the stuff for 'em is gone! Fair done!"

I was getting anxious about Marjorie and Mrs. Shepperoe by that time, and I suggested that as old Bowler was now revived we should all go down to the camp. Shepperoe and I each gave the elder victim an arm, the younger one marched well enough by himself. We heard nothing and saw nothing of Melchisedech and his gang on our way, but that it was they who had first stunned the gamekeepers and then stolen their guns and cartridges we had no doubt. Nor had I, personally, any doubt that before long there would be new developments and probably bloodshed.

That admirable and managing woman, Mrs. Shepperoe—who evidently slept fully attired, seeing that she was out of the tilt, wholly equipped, within a minute of being hailed—took old Bowler and his swollen skull into her charge at once and began to bustle about him, while Shepperoe, at her command, made up the stick fire and hung on the black kettle; tea, hot and strong, appeared to be Mrs. Shepperoe's panacea for most ailments. And while husband and wife were thus engaged I talked to young Bowler, who was rapidly recovering, and now complained of nothing but a lump—

about the size of half an orange—on the back of his head, and gave him a brief account of our doings during the past twenty-four hours.

He listened with starting eyes and open mouth, evidently amazed that such things could be. But when it came to the story of the messenger dog, young Bowler's face fell.

"A dog!" he said, a little doubtfully. "What make of a dog, now? We shot a dog—as we came along to-night."

I groaned—realising the worst. And Shepperoe, busied at his fire, turned and stared.

"You shot a dog?" I exclaimed. "Shepperoe!—that's yours! And the letter——"

"Where did you shoot him, mate?" inquired the hawker. "And what time?"

"Just about when the moon come bright," answered young Bowler. "Down there in the Bottoms. He was running Kellie's sheep. And there's been one or two sheep-worriers about of late—so we just downed him. A biggish, lean-built dog he were, fur as I could judge—we didn't go so very near him."

"There's our chance of relief gone, then!" said I. "And these young devils have got your guns!"

Marjorie just then called to me from the shelter of the tilt, and I went over and told her of our recent doings and of the fate of Shepperoe's mongrel.

"Was ever such luck!" I concluded. "Here we are, without any immediate prospect of relief—and those bloodthirsty young ruffians have got two shot-guns and a couple of dozen cartridges! For heaven's sake keep close in that tilt!—for all we know they'll take pot-shots at us from the bushes!"

But Marjorie was incredulous. She knew Melchisedech better than I did.

"No!" she said. "They'll not waste either time or cartridges on us, Dick—unless we interfere. They'll keep their powder and shot for Kiffin. You watch that cottage. We're all right."

I was not so sure of that. But I went back to Shepperoe to find out what he thought.

Young Bowler was talking to him; he turned to me as I drew near them.

"Look here, mister," he said. "I'm sorry I shot that there dog—but, as I say, 'twere my opinion—and no doubt a right 'un—that he was a sheep-killer. Howsumever, as he

was a-carrying o' that letter, I'll do what I can—I'll go for help myself. I'll get it—and proper, too. And—quick!"

"Good lad!" exclaimed Shepperoe. He glanced knowingly at me. "But——" he said, and paused. "The captain there knows what I mean," he concluded.

"Yes," I said. "Shepperoe means, Bowler, that now that those fellows have got your guns, they'll not let any of us out of this quarry. They're probably ambushed up there, at the exit, planning some new devilry—and there's no other way out. They'd shoot you!"

Young Bowler laughed—showing a set of fine white teeth in the moonlight.

"You're wrong there, sir," he said. "I reckon I know this quarry better nor Shepperoe does! There is a way out—and in—to a man as can climb. In that far corner—down there. I'll take a cup o' that tea that Mother Shepperoe's brewing, and then—I'll be off in a fashion that nobody'll know of. And I'll have them here in a couple of hours that'll settle them chaps, and the chaps in the cottage, too. Leave it to me—I'll do it!"

This was the best stuff I had heard talked

for a long time, and I shook young Bowler heartily—and no doubt sentimentally—by the hand, and wished him good luck. And presently he had his cup of tea, and having drunk it—laced by a drop of rum from Shepperoe's bottle—he slipped away into the bushes and so vanished. I listened for several minutes, fearing to hear a shot, but no sound broke the stillness save the hissing of Mrs. Shepperoe's kettle and the murmur of Shepperoe and the old keeper's voices. These two were sitting under the lee of the cart, and I went over and joined them. Old Bowler, considerably relieved by Mrs. Shepperoe's unguents, and revived by rum and tea, had become almost lively, and was listening with avidity and interest to the hawker's account of our doings and predicaments.

"Kiffin, now," said he, as I came up and sat down near him and Shepperoe. "Kiffin? Dunno as I ever heard that name in connection with old Dan Flint. Unfamiliar, that there name is. Been boy and man hereabouts, I have, this sixty year, and do know all the folks as lives in these parts, but I never hear tell o' no Kiffins."

"Relation of old Dan Flint's on the mother's side," said I. "According to Kiffin."

Old Bowler ruminated a while.

"If so be as I hadn't got this here plaguy crack on my cran'um," he said presently, "I could tell 'ee the whole fam'ly sarcumstances o' they Flints, so I could. You'd likely see a woman here, master, what comes for to clean up—leastways, her does when Mr. Colstervine's about."

"Mrs. Squeech," I suggested. "Yes—we've seen her."

"Them Flints and Squeeches," he continued, "is all rellytives. A Flint marries a Squeech, or a Squeech weds a Flint. They be all mixed up. But I don't bring to mind no Kiffins at all, 'longing to neither Flints nor Squeeches."

"Kiffin," said I, "says that he was here, at this cottage, when he was a boy—in old Dan Flint's time."

"Aye, well," remarked old Bowler, "to be sure, there was a passil o' boys about this here place, one time or another, but 'tis in my mind as they was either Squeeches or Flints. In old Dan's time that was, sure-ly. But 'tis a long time agone, that, master—and after old

Dan there come his son, Ben. Ben Flint, he live in that there cottage after they'd give up working the quarry. Let it go all to tumble-down-come, he did, 'cause why? Sometimes he was here, and sometimes he warn't. Being—away!"

"Seafaring man?" I suggested.

"In his younger days he was summat o' that," he answered. "But latterly, and most of his time, he didn't use the sea, Ben didn't. He put in most of his time—elsewhere."

"Just so," murmured Shepperoe. "Elsewheer! A good word!"

"What do you mean by it?" I asked. "Where was—elsewhere?"

Old Bowler, who had by this time come round so far as to be able to smoke a pipe which Shepperoe had lent him, his own having been smashed in the assault at the coppice, sucked silently at its contents for a while.

"Well, master," he replied at last, "if so be as you want pertiklurs, elsewhere was sometimes Portsmouth Gaol, or Lewes Gaol, or it med be Dartmoor, or it med be Portland. Ben Flint being, when all's added up, a main bad 'un! Housebreaker and a thief—that's what

Ben Flint were. Allus mixed up with a rascally lot, from the time he were a young 'un. Deal o' trouble I've had wi' Ben Flint. Now and then—when he were out, ye'll understand—he'd come and quarter hisself in this here old cottage, what was then falling to pieces, and he'd powch. Rabbits I takes no heed on, and hares—a hare or two now and again I ain't over pertiklur about. But if 'twas the right season—autumn, you'll bear in mind—he was a rare hand at getting at my pheasants, and of course flesh and blood couldn't bide that there. On'y—I never could catch him! He were a clever man, Ben!"

"Cute, eh?" I said. "Sharp?"

"Both, and more, master," said he. "Oiliest-tongued varmint as ever I come across! And black-hearted. Bad, bad, master, all through him! I seen him, more nor once, in the dock, where they put such as him at sessions and 'sizes—more by token, I sees him very last time he was at 'sizes—Lewes, that were—and I hears what the ol' judge says to him, when the jury finds him guilty, as of course he were. 'It's difficult to know what to do wi' you, Flint,' says the ol' chap, and—sitting there in his

gowns and his wig, and speaking despairing like. 'You bin in and out o' prison most o' your life,' he says, 'according to the record we've just heard,' he say. 'Whatever good it do you,' he say, 'I can't think, for as soon as you're let out, you're in again,' he says. 'However,' he say, 'the public must be protected agin men like you, and you must go to penal servitude for five year.' And, in course, he went, did Ben. Five year!"

"How long since is that?" I asked.

"How long? Five year," answered old Bowler.

"Then he'll be about out again?" I suggested.

"Out he will be, master," he assented. "And some little time, for I hear them as knows say as how Ben was what they call a model prisoner, and 'arned his good conduct 'lowance o' time off. Yes, he'll be out—and about. Though, to be sure, I ain't heard nothing of him round these parts this time. But, of course, Mr. Colstervine, he's got that cottage now, so Ben, he ain't nowhere to come to."

I turned to the hawker, who had been listening attentively.

"Shepperoe!" said I. "We know that Kiffin's got another man with him in the cottage. I think that man is Ben Flint!"

"Same here, master," he answered. "I been figuring on that this last five minutes. Birds of a feather! Of course, they'll ha' met."

"You may be sure it's Ben Flint," I said. "I'm beginning to see through things. Probably it was Kiffin and Ben Flint who did that burglary at Portsmouth that the little Jew told me of. They secreted the swag up here, most likely in the cottage. Then they got into trouble again. Now they're free again. And I suppose Kiffin came first and ingratiated himself with me and my wife, and turned us out, and let Ben Flint in, and there you are!"

"And there they are, master!" said Shepperoe. "For I'll swear they ain't got away yet, though 'tis my opinion they'll make a try for it before the night's over. But a more serious question, master, is, where are those other chaps? Now that they've got those guns and two dozen cartridges, they'll not go away without a try for Kiffin. Master! they're somewhere about, and we'd best to keep a

smarter look-out than ever. Till young Bill comes with help."

"He'll come wi' that!" said old Bowler. "Bill'll come!"

He then remarked that he would be none the worse of a nap, his head being still mazed and queer-like, so we made him as comfortable as we could under the lee of the cart, and ourselves resumed a careful and more vigilant watch of the cottage and its surroundings. It was then a little after one o'clock, and the night was beginning to cloud a little—masses of cloud gathered in the south-east and came drifting through the sky, so that sometimes the quarry was plunged in gloom, and sometimes, when the clouds passed, bathed again in bright moonlight. It was in one of the gloomy intervals, and, I think, just before two o'clock, that Shepperoe and I suddenly caught a sound that brought us smartly to attention.

Somebody within the cottage was slowly and cautiously undoing the fastenings of the front door—we heard a bolt shot back, a key turned. And gripping our guns, we cautiously stole forward until we were within twenty yards of the garden gate.

The door opened, just as the clouds cleared the moon and left everything clear in her beautiful radiance. A man appeared. Not Kiffin. A taller, bigger man. Appeared, for one instant. The next, two flashes of crimson fire burst from the thick cover in the garden, and with a sharp, startled cry he fell across the threshold of the porch. And out of the macrocarpus trees rushed four figures, and leaping across their victim, stormed into the open door. Before we could move, we heard the key turn and the bolt driven home.

CHAPTER XI

The White Flag

THE whole of this business was begun and finished so quickly that Melchisedech and his gang were safely in the cottage, with a barred and locked door between us and them, before Shepperoe and I had time to grasp the situation. Indeed, as we instinctively rushed forward to the fallen man, over whose body his assailants had leapt without as much as a glance at him, we saw the smoke from the captured shot-guns still curling about the trees and bushes of the garden, amongst which the Jew and his comrades had evidently remained in concealment since their assault on the game-keepers. There was a fine smell of gunpowder in the moonlit air, and if we wanted a pertinent reminiscence of old war-days, there it was in the figure stretched across the flagged path, half-in, half-out of the porch.

"They done him, master!" muttered Shep-

peroe, as we bundled into the garden. "S'elp me, I never thought of 'em taking cover in here! And now—they're inside! But—this here chap?"

As we ran towards him, the fallen man stirred. He pulled himself to a sitting posture, stared about him in the moonlight, staggered to his feet. His right hand went up to his left shoulder. He drew it away, stared blankly at it. And on his right hand, then, I saw crimson stains. He looked round from the contemplation of it to us.

This, as I have already said, was not Kiffin. He was an older man, a tallish, Spanish fellow, clean-shaven. Naturally cadaverous, he now, from his recent shock, looked deathlike in his pallor. But he suddenly opened his lips and let out a flood of oaths and curses.

"You ain't killed dead, anyhow, mate!" said Shepperoe, as we got up to the man. "Your tongue's live enough. Where did they hit you? —not your lungs, I'll be bound."

The man stayed his foul tongue and looked sullenly from one to the other of us.

"Got it in this here left shoulder," he growled. "A blarsted lot o' young——"

"Where's Kiffin?" I broke in on him. "Where?"

He glared at me as if I had put some unusually impudent question to him—and he was one of those men who, if they glare in that fashion, make one think of a wild and desperate animal, ready to spring. He was an evil-looking chap, too—his cap had fallen off, and his close-cropped, bullet-like head, small nose, and ugly mouth and chin were not good to look on. But after glaring at me he seemed to understand my meaning, and he spoke, inoffensively enough.

"Kiffin?" he muttered. "In—there! If he ain't cut his lucky through the back. And if he ain't, then—he's a dead man!"

I called the hawker to come on, and keeping close to the lower walls of the cottage hurried round to the back. There were two doors there; one admitted to the scullery; it was fast barred and chained; the other opened into the lean-to erection, a sort of extra wing, that I had spoken of to Marjorie as being full of wood, and that also contained a barrel of petroleum; its outer door was open, and we went in amongst its contents. But the communi-

cating inner door between it and the cottage was securely fastened; a good stout door, too. Clearly Kiffin had not made his escape at the rear when the gang rushed in at the front.

We stood by that inner door for a minute or two, listening. We could hear plenty of sound from inside the cottage—the trampling of feet on the stair, the smashing of wood, the crack of breaking glass; we could even hear Melchisedech's voice, shouting orders to his satellites. But we heard nothing to indicate that Kiffin and his pursuers had at last come to close quarters.

"Come round to that man, Shepperoe," I said. "We'll get something out of him."

We quitted the wood-shed and went, as cautiously as before, back to the porch. My notion was to get, one way or another, an idea of the situation from the man we had left there. If Kiffin was still in that cottage, he had either been murdered already, or he would be murdered—in either case it behoved us, now that they were safely in what could only turn out to be a trap, to keep his murderers within four walls until help came.

But the man was gone. The porch stood

black and empty. On the whiteness of the path before it, where the moon, now unclouded and more brilliant, threw its light unchecked, there were two or three dark circular blots—blood. But the man from whom they had dripped had vanished. And all around us the tall, thick-branched, black macrocarpus trees, silhouetted against sky and moon and stars, suggested silence and vacancy.

I don't know why I called out, but call I did—twice, at the top of my voice.

"Hullo!" I shouted. "Hullo!"

There was no answer, of course. Things seemed to have grown quiet inside the cottage, and when the echo from my last shout had died away, the quarry was once more as silent as a vault. Except that just then the nightingale once again broke into a mellifluous pipe, pipe, pipe amongst the pine trees on the farther edge.

" 'Tain't no good calling, master," observed Shepperoe. "He's off, that 'un! Hadn't no call to wait, d'ye see?"

"Where can he have gone?" I growled angrily. "Can't have got far. Let's find him."

But Shepperoe shook his head, and after-

wards nodded at the thick-treed garden and the waste of bush outside.

"Med as well look for a needle in a hay-stack as look for he, now, master," he said. "He'd five minutes' start. He may be in them trees, at edge o' the garden, same as them young varmints was, or he may be away in the quarry. And he may ha' thought well and advisable to cut his stick and get off while there was a chance. For, to be sure—Lord ha' mercy, what's this here?"

He had shifted his position as he spoke, and now he suddenly stooped forward and down, and from a cluster of arabis that grew in the bordering of the path, snatched up something that glittered and coruscated in the moonlight.

"Shiners!" he exclaimed in a hushed, almost awe-stricken voice. "As I'm a living man, shiners! A woman's necklace on 'em!"

True enough, it was a diamond necklace that he was handling, and what was more, the stones, as far as I could judge, looked to be very good ones. He held the thing up for a second, then pushed it hurriedly into my hands.

"That'll be part o' that burgled stock that you told me about, master," he said. "And I reckon he dropped it—that feller we see just now. Pulled it out wi' his handkercher, make no doubt, when he was making shift to tie up his arm. Well, well!—and there'll be more o' that sort o' thing where that came from. And them gallus-birds is in with it—and with Kiffin!"

I slipped the necklace into my pocket and handled my gun again.

"Shepperoe!" I said. "We've got to keep a tight hold on this place—till young Bowler comes back with help. What help do you think he can get?"

"Plenty, master!" he answered. "He's away, so his father says, to Mr. Pellanty's place, what him and the old man's keepers to. There's a sight o' men there—grooms and footmen, and labourers, and such-like, and plenty o' guns, too. He'll come back wi' a good fighting force, will young Bill!"

"And when?" I asked. "How far away is this place?"

'Two mile, mebbe, master," he answered.

"Yon side o' the hill—down amongst the woods. Give him a couple of hours."

"Come back to your cart, then," said I. "And then we watch this door."

Taking advantage of the thick cover around the garden, we made our way back to the cart and the fire. The sound of the shooting had re-aroused Mrs. Shepperoe and Marjorie; both, standing by old Bowler, were anxiously looking out for our return. Marjorie ran forward to meet us. But I anticipated any question of hers by one of my own.

"Have any of you seen a man get away from the cottage?" I asked, looking from one to the other. "A tall man, away amongst the bushes?"

They had seen nothing since the flash of the guns. Nor heard anything. But before I could give an explanation and show the necklace, we all heard something—something that made the women shudder and turned Shepperoe and myself sharp round in the direction we had just come from. And that was a scream—the shrill, terrified scream of a man in dire peril.

"Kiffin!" muttered Shepperoe. "Kiffin! Master!—they've got him!"

Behind us Mrs. Shepperoe, once again engaged in the brewing of tea, uttered a sharp sigh.

"Murder!" she breathed, with a definite emphasis. "Murder! that's what that is. And didn't I say, all along, that if we got through this night without murder being done we should ha' more luck than I looked for? Murdering on him! that's what them fellers is doing. And might ha' been us!"

But here old Bowler, who had roused himself from a nap at our return, shook his bruised head and put in an authoritative word.

"No, missus!" he said, oracularly. "That ain't murder!—leastways, 'tain't murder so fur. That's a man in hagony—that's what that be! A-crying out, d'ye understand? under torture. They're a torturing on him for to make him speak, I reckon. A man what's being murdered don't cry out like that. There 'tis again! and they'm a dealing hard and cruel wi' he! I've heard a man cry out that way time or two afore now, and I do know what it siggerfys."

Whatever it might signify, it was no pleas-

ant thing to stand there, helpless, and hear a fellow-being, however bad he might be, scream as Kiffin did just then. Probably old Bowler was right—Melchisedech and his gang had laid hands on Kiffin at last, and were manhandling him with the ferocity to be expected of them, forcing him to disgorge or to give up his secret, or simply wreaking their pent-up vengeance on his unfortunate carcass. I pictured his smug and smooth-spoken personality, his plump, well-fed body in the hands of Fakoe and Greever, veritable birds of prey, both—but, on reflection, I was not sure that Melchisedech, having Kiffin at his mercy, might not prove more cruel, in an ingenious and utterly vindictive fashion, than his men.

That second scream was the last. It was a shriller, more suggestive scream than the first. Was it the prelude to the cutting of Kiffin's throat or the bashing in of his skull or—but whatever it was, an ugly and oppressive silence followed upon it. For half-an-hour after its piercing of the quiet night we heard nothing. And then, as Shepperoe and I were speculating on what might be going on within the cottage and the whereabouts of the

wounded man and the probabilities of young Bowler's speedy return with help, we heard a sudden, sharp sound, and saw that one of the garrison had unbarred the shutters of an upstairs window, thrown up the casement, and thrust out something that fluttered feebly in the light breeze.

"The white flag!" exclaimed Marjorie. "Look!—they're waving it!"

True enough, that was some white clout or other that they had fastened to a stick and were now waving at us as if with an invitation to approach. I glanced at the hawker, and he shook his head dubiously.

"Aye, all right, master!" said he. "The white flag, right enough, as your good lady says. But—in whose hands? I wouldn't trust them fellows as far as I could throw 'em! Be wary, master."

"Yes," I said. "But I dare say they do want to speak to us. I've an idea why. They probably want to get away, having got what they want."

"And I says, be wary, master!" repeated Shepperoe. "I dare say they does want to get away, and they knows well enough that

just now there's nothing and nobody to stop 'em but you and me. Now then, supposing you and me goes up to 'em, under that bit o' towel or whatever it is they're shaking at us, what's to prevent 'em shooting us from them windows? As I say, I ain't no trust in 'em. If they didn't shoot us dead, they could make us as we couldn't do aught to stop their going. That sort don't keep no faith wi' nobody, master! What about that there knife?"

I felt that he was right; he was backed up, too, by approving and corroborative murmurs from Mrs. Shepperoe and old Bowler. But I had a sneaking belief in a certain sense of business in Melchisedech, and the flag was being waved more insistently than ever, with an obviously beckoning motion.

"There's this about it, Shepperoe," I remarked. "Scoundrels though they are, this lot, they're all ex-service men, and they know the meaning of the white flag——"

"Master!" he broke in, "if it had been any o' them old Boches, now, I'd ha' gone forrard willing! But these here young guttersnipes, d'ye think they care a curse about what a gentleman like you 'ud call honour? I doubts it,

and I says again, be wary o' what you're doing."

But I had already made up my mind to respond. There may have been an overstrong curiosity in me; I may have put too much faith in the Jew. Anyway, I pulled out my handkerchief, knotted it to a length of stick that lay near the fire, and showed signs of moving.

"Then in that case I'm with you, master," said Shepperoe. "But——"

"We'll go up to a safeish distance, Shepperoe," I answered. "After all, those shotguns don't carry such a long way. Let's be sure of what they're after. We've got the whip-hand of them, when all's said and done. Come on!"

Holding up my flag, I went forward to within fifty yards of the cottage. The flag thrust out of the window was waved vigorously —once; then it dropped over the sill, and above it, clearly seen in the full glare of the unclouded moon, appeared the pale features of Melchisedech. Shepperoe and I halted.

"Well?" I called across the intervening space. "What now?"

The night was so still that Melchisedech's reply came to us audibly enough; it was audible, too, to the group we had left by the camp fire. There was an undisguised note of triumph in it.

"Mithter!" he shouted. "Mithter! We've got Kiffin!"

"Well?" I replied.

"Didn't I alwayth thay we thould get Kiffin, mithter?" he went on. "I told you! And we have got him—to hith thorrow! We done Kiffin a treat, mithter! And tho——"

"Look you here, Melchisedech," I broke in on these fiendish rejoicings, "I'm not going to barter talk with you! What have you done to that man?"

"Never you mind what we done to Kiffin, mithter!" he retorted, with more impudence than he had ever previously shown during our eighteen hours' acquaintanceship. "I thaid we thould put him through it, and that'th enough; hith own mother 'ud be thick if thee thaw Kiffin ath he ith jutht now. But we done with Kiffin—and we've got what we wanted, too, mithter, and tho, mithter, we want to be going!"

Shepperoe, at my elbow, made a growl of dissent.

"Don't 'ee say a word to that, master!" he muttered. "Leastways, not to say that they can. As things is, they young varmints is trapped."

I considered matters a while. For some reason unaccountable to myself, I was curiously anxious about Kiffin.

"I've told you already, Melchisedech, that I'm not going to have any talk with you unless you tell me what you've done with Kiffin," I called. "Are you going to tell me?"

"You can thee Kiffin for yourthelf, mithter, when we getth out o' thith plathe," he called back. "Kiffin ith in the kitthin, mithter—give uth your word that you and that hawker-chap won't interfere with uth, and we'll be off."

"And suppose we don't?" I demanded.

"Then we thall jutht forth our way, mithter," he replied. "We've got gunth now, and thtuff to put in 'em——"

"Melchisedech!" I called, in louder tones. "We're very well aware of what you've got. You've got two guns and about twenty cartridges. We've got two guns and a box full of

cartridges. If it comes to a fight, we can last you out."

His answer came back as coolly impudent as it was ready.

"May be tho, mithter," he said. "But we're jutht ath good thotth ath you and your hawker-man, and maybe better, and you can't thoot off more than two cartridgeth at onth, mithter!—if it com'th to it, we thall hit thomebody! Prapth thomebody you won't like to thee hit. And what good'll that do, mithter? Better thtand athide, and let uth go, quiet."

The reference to their chances—or designs—of hitting somebody other than Shepperoe and myself, by which, of course, he meant the women, made my blood boil, and without thinking I shouted a threat.

"You murderous young scoundrel!" I called. "If you and your lot as much as put your noses out of that door, we'll fire on you! Do you hear th——"

In the very middle of the last word a bright flash of flame broke from the corner of the window at which Melchisedech stood; a similar one from the other window on the right hand of the porch. I felt a sudden sharp sting

in the peak of my left shoulder and heard the rattle of pellets on the wood and metal of the gun that was resting over it; at the same moment Shepperoe winced and swore under his breath. Together we turned and ran—and behind us I heard Melchisedech's voice, audibly cursing his men for their bad marksmanship.

"You were right, Shepperoe!" I panted, as we made off. "My fault! And—you're hit?"

"A scratch, master!" he answered. "Nothing. But——"

What he was going to say, I don't know. As we raced up to the camp, Mrs. Shepperoe, always vigilant, screamed, pointing to something behind us; Marjorie, too, saw, and exclaimed loudly. And whipping round, I saw what it was they were gazing at. From the corner of the cottage a thick, murky column of white smoke was rapidly rising—a second more, and its convolutions were lurid with spirals and slabs of red flame. The wood-shed —and the petroleum—were on fire!

CHAPTER XII

Old Bowler Identifies

MORE than once during that eventful day and night one or other of us had talked of the chances of firing Colstervine's cottage; now that this had actually happened we stood surprised and aghast, as if the matter were an amazing thing that had been beyond all possibility. But there it was before our very eyes!—and the column of smoke was growing in density, and the tongues of flame waxing in brilliancy, and already the roar and crackle of the readily combustible stuff was filling the quarry with sound. And underneath that I heard Mrs. Shepperoe and Marjorie talking in excited whispers, and the hawker muttering close at my side.

"That'll be that fellow they shot at—what slipped us," he was saying. "Done it for to burn 'em out! And from what I see in that wood-shed, that will burn and no mistaking

on it! Burned out, master!—that's what'll come of that!"

"Is there nothing we can do?" I exclaimed. "If we could stop it spreading——"

He glanced in the direction of the spring from which he and his wife had filled their kettle more than once during the night, and from it to a range of his buckets that formed part of his stock-in-trade.

"There's water, and there's pails to carry it in," he muttered. "But, Lord bless 'ee, master! we'd have that spring dry in no time, and we ain't enough hands to carry the water even if we'd a reseyvor to dip into! And the stuff in that shed was so dry as tinder, and then that barrel o' paraffin! That—but harkie there, now!"

The stuff of which he was speaking blew up at that moment, and a vast column of flame shot up into the sky and illumined our faces as clearly as a sudden burst of vivid sunlight in the middle of a darkened sky. I remember catching a vivid impression of old Bowler sitting forward on his improvised couch, staring as if incredulously, at the sight before him, and of Mrs. Shepperoe, her gay-coloured shawl

clutched tightly at her throat, muttering her lamentations as the flames caught and spread along the thatched roof. But the next instant we had something else to look at—the front door of the cottage was thrown wide and Melchisedech and his gang rushed pell-mell out into the garden. That, too, was catching fire; great flakes of burning stuff, cast up by the whirling holocaust at the rear of the cottage, were dropping on the thick-foliaged trees and shrubs, and long quivering lines of flame were running from point to point on all sides. And Shepperoe and I were quick to apprehend one feature of this panic-stricken retreat at once—in their haste to be gone the driven-out garrison had thrown aside or neglected to carry away the captured guns with which they had threatened us not ten minutes before.

But in the fierce light of the leaping flames we also saw that they were otherwise encumbered. Each carried something in the shape of a bag—as a matter of fact, to be discovered later, they had commandeered our suit-cases—and each was pretty heavily laden, for their movements, hurried though they were, seemed plainly hampered by the weights they carried.

They made straight through the bushes for the mouth of the quarry, and at that Shepperoe and I, forgetting the fire or, rather, realising that we could do nothing to stop it, ran forward, guns ready, and took them in the flank. We caught them at twenty yards' distance as they came panting and struggling under their burdens up the level turf, and had them covered before they knew we were there.

"Down with those things, all of you!" I shouted. "Drop them!—every man!"

They were running in single file—Greever first with my suit-case, evidently very heavy; Fakoe second, with Marjorie's; Dex next, with a Gladstone bag which I recognised as Colstervine's; Melchisedech, a smaller thing, box or bag, under his arm, and moving more nimbly than the others because of its lesser weight, brought up the rear.

He stared silently at me as I called, and ran on, saying something to the three in front; the two leading figures drew abreast of us.

"Take the first chap, Shepperoe!" I shouted. "I'll take the second. Fire at their legs! Now then!"

We bowled Greever and Fakoe over with

our first barrels, and they went down with a series of howls and screeches that rose high above the crackling of the flames in our rear, and rolling over in the smart of the peppering we had given their legs, suddenly relapsed into half-lying, half-sitting postures, and fell to cursing us and everything. But we had swept our muzzles round on the other two—and I knew then that whatever the subordinates there were carrying away in their commandeered receptacles, Melchisedech carried the most valuable part of the loot, for as I levelled my gun at him he dodged behind Dex, turned with the sharpness of a weasel, and twisting this way and that, fled like a hare through the bushes. At that we both fired at him, but we got no answering scream or howl, and he and his box disappeared into the shadows. As for Dex, he stood stock-still, and he put up his hands, after throwing his burden on the ground before him with an expression of hearty disgust.

"Don't shoot, guv'nor!" he said, pleadingly. "Don't shoot. It's all up—I'm done. And I was again it, guv'nor, all through. I didn't want nothing but my own, d'ye see? It was

Melky, guv'nor!—when we found the stuff, he would have it, and——"

"What's in those suit-cases and in this bag?" I demanded.

"Stuff, guv'nor, the swag," he answered readily, and evidently disposed to give all the information he was asked for. "What we found—in there."

"What's Melchisedech got?" I asked.

"The best on it!" he answered. "Diamonds! and such-like, guv'nor. And I say, guv'nor—lemme go!—I hadn't nothing to do with the shooting, nor nothing, guv'nor!"

"Who set fire to the cottage?" I demanded.

" 'Twasn't none of us, guv'nor," he replied. "S'elp me, none of us done that! We didn't know anything about it till it come bursting in from that back place into the kitchen, like."

"Then that's on fire?" I exclaimed.

"Starting—when we come out," he asserted.

"Where's Kiffin?" I asked.

"In there, guv'nor," he answered. "The cottage."

"Dead?" I demanded. "What did you do to him?—come now, straight!"

"He ain't dead," he retorted. "We done

nothing 'cept to put him through it a bit. But —he's tied up."

"Tied up!" I exclaimed. "How—where?"

"Tied him up to that post in the kitchen," he answered, sullenly. "Leastways, Greever and Fakoe, they tied him up. Melky's orders, that was."

I looked at Shepperoe, he looked at me. Our thoughts ran in the same direction—to a live man tied up, helpless, in a burning house. We turned to the cottage. The wood-shed in the rear seemed to be burning itself out; the column of thick smoke had lessened in bulk; the stabs and spirals of flame were less vivid. But the cottage itself was on fire now—the thatch was burning steadily at this point where the roof of the main building adjoined the shingled top of the lean-to, and already wisps of smoke were drifting out of the open door, in front of which the dry branches of the trees and shrubs were well alight.

"Shepperoe!" I said. "We've got to get in there. The man's alive! We can't let him burn to death! Come on! But first——"

I walked up to where Greever and Fakoe lay. Each had received a full charge of our

number twelve cartridges about his knees and calves—enough in each case to cripple. I seized on my own suit-case, signed to the hawker to take Marjorie's, and bade Dex bring his Gladstone bag. We left the two fallen combatants cursing us and Melchisedech, and went back to the cart.

"Get some towels, Shepperoe, and soak them in water," I said, as we laid down our burdens. "We've got to get into the kitchen and get Kiffin out. He'll—listen there!"

A scream for help, shriller and keener than anything that had preceded it, came through the now steady, dull roaring of the fire. It was repeated—and repeated—and suddenly, as Shepperoe and I, hastily snatching at the cloths which Mrs. Shepperoe and Marjorie had soaked in water, were about to run down to the cottage, we heard other sounds from behind us.

"Bill!" muttered old Bowler. "He done it! —and quicker nor what I expected."

I suppose I was never so glad to see anybody or anything in my life as I was to see Bill Bowler and his irregular army come hugger-mugger through the opening to the quarry.

They made straight for us, and a queer mixed lot they looked as they rushed up to the hawker's cart. There must have been twenty of them in all—grooms, footmen, game-watchers, labourers, a solitary policeman; there were even a couple of stalwart country women, who came running in at the rear. And each and all carried some sort of offensive weapon—a gun or two, axes, pick-axes, hedging-bills, a crowbar, hatchets; I was more delighted to see that sort of thing than the guns. For as far as I could judge, there was still a chance—small perhaps, but there—of saving the cottage if we could cut away the burning shed at its rear and tear out the spreading flame in the thatched roof. But first—Kiffin.

"Come on, you fellows!" I shouted, as this strange relief force came racing up, all in a state of high excitement. "The cottage first—there's a man in there tied up! We must get him out—then, round to the back. and on to that thatch!"

We poured down to the cottage in a confused mass, and into the garden, where the branches were shrivelling and cracking with queer little popping noises. And so in at the open door,

through the smoke—Shepperoe and I, our damp cloths about our mouths and noses, first. Whatever the fire was doing in the thick thatch of the roofs, it had not yet got any great hold on the lower part of the cottage; the hall and the staircase were as yet untouched, the parlour, too, was still unharmed; what smoke we encountered seemed to have crept in from the rear of the place. But as we broke through it into the kitchen, we saw at once the reason of Kiffin's despairing screams for help. The scullery behind the kitchen was well alight, and in the woodwork of that part of the kitchen itself which was nearest to it, the flames were steadily creeping nearer and nearer to the stout post near the deep-set fireplace to which Melchisedech and his pals had bound their enemy. In the light of these flames we saw Kiffin. He had ceased to call and scream for some minutes then. He was hanging from, rather than standing by the post—a heavy oaken pole which had been left to support the over-arching mantelpiece; his head had fallen forward on his breast, and he looked like a dead man. Yet there was as yet not enough smoke in that place to choke anyone—Shep-

peroe and I, indeed, had already torn the damp cloths from our chins and turned them aside; nevertheless, there the man hung by his fastenings, limp, motionless, silent. We hastened to get near and to free him.

But the job was to reach Kiffin! In the glare of the flames at the back of the kitchen we saw something of what had gone on in Colstervine's cottage since Kiffin had turned Marjorie and myself out of it. Every moveable scrap of furniture in the place—I mean, in the kitchen—had been lifted out of it, into the hall, in the parlour, or the scullery. The boarding of the floor had been torn up; the planks lay in a heap on the scullery floor, the fire busy amongst them. Bricks, stones, cement lay tossed out there, too; there were heaps of soil and clay; the entire surface of the kitchen floor had disappeared, and where it had been was a yawning excavation. Clearly, Kiffin and his associate, admitted heaven knows when, had spent their time in digging up the swag which Melchisedech and his gang had failed to carry off. It was an irregular excavation which they had made—and immediately in front of the

post to which Kiffin was slung by waist and shoulders lay a pit as deep as a grave.

We had no easy task, in that smoke-laden atmosphere, and with the fire crackling and spreading in our rear, in getting the man free of his bonds, and across that pit and out of the cottage. He was unconscious enough, and we saw quite plenty, while we were releasing him, to show us that before being tied up he had been cruelly and barbarously mishandled. He was still unconscious when we got him clear of the garden and laid him down on the turf; leaving the women who had followed young Bowler and his irregular regiment to attend to him, I turned my resources on the cottage. For all through this I was thinking of Colstervine, and my responsibilities to him, and of all the money he had laid out on this pet possession, and of his valuable old furniture, and all the rest of it—and in my anxiety to save at any rate something, I made lavish promises to the men around me.

They went to work with a will. There was a couple of ladders lying under the fence in the back garden, and by means of these some of the men mounted to the roof and began to

cut away the burning thatch; others, with axe and hatchet, cut away the smouldering ruins of the wood-shed; others, more daring, fought the fire from within the cottage itself. Gradually we began to get the upper hand of it; bit by bit the flame was stamped out and the smoke subdued—at last, as dawn came breaking over the eastern edge of the pines, I saw that we were going to save the place, and half-exhausted, I turned up the quarry towards Shepperoe's camp.

And going up there, and as Marjorie came hastening to meet me, I saw a strange sight. Coming at a great pace down the quarry, at the head of another assemblage, not quite so assorted as that led by young Bowler, was one of the biggest men I have ever seen in my life. He seemed to me to be nearer seven feet than six; he was correspondingly broad and big in chest and girth and thigh; his hand was more like a leg of mutton than an ordinary fist, and he strode the ground at such a rate and with such prodigious strides that the half-dozen men behind him had to trot to keep up to him. They were big men, too—shepherds, labourers—but amongst them were two blue uniforms.

"This'll be Macpherson—that Colstervine told us of," said I. "Oh!—if he'd only come yesterday with a couple of those chaps behind him! But who's that they've got in the middle of 'em?"

Then—we saw. Macpherson strode ahead towards us, for all the world like a Highland chieftain leading his clan into battle, but as he and his men drew nearer, the ranks parted a little, and there, between the policemen, his box still under his arm, walked, or rather shambled at a dog-trot, our half-friend, half-enemy, Melchisedech. The policemen were evidently very suspicious about him, and very watchful of him, but as the group came close I could not help seeing that Melchisedech himself had not yet lost all hope; he was, I could see, hard at work exercising his brains to the framing of plausible reasons for his presence, for his possession of the box and its contents; if need be, for his very existence; he even cocked his eye at us, half-knowingly, half-appealingly.

The great giant-man came along with an outstretched hand. He bowed politely over Marjorie's slim fingers, but the grip he gave

my smoke-blackened fist was enough to wrench a sapling out of the ground.

"Man!" he exclaimed, staring at me, and from me to Marjorie, and from her to the smoke about the cottage, now fading into occasional puffs and wisps. "Man! A'm afeart ye'll ha'e had an awfu' nicht o' 't!"

"Pretty hot stuff, thank you, Mr. Macpherson," I answered. "Battles, nearly murders, and next door to sudden deaths. But we've got over the worst, I think, and we've saved some of Colstervine's cottage for him—the best part of it, too. And we're glad to see you, Mr. Macpherson—and where did you come across that chap?"

I pointed to Melchisedech, and the big man, turning, looked that worthy carefully over, stroking his great beard, meditatively.

"Aweel," he said at last. "Ye see, we saw the reek o' the fire, and we set off to find out what was going on. And we cam' across this little feller slippin' awa', and we didna like his looks. And so we juist made free to tak' a look into his box—and losh, man, d'ye ken there's a wealth o' precious stones in there—a'm feart he's a thief!"

Melchisedech turned a highly injured face on his detractor.

"I ain't no thief, mithter!" he exclaimed. "What I've told thethe here two offitherth ath we've come along ith gothpel truth. I wath going to hand thith here thwag and all the retht of it in thethe thuit-cateth over to the polithe, and claim a reward what'th been offered for it at Portthmouth. The Portthmouth polithe knowth all about it, and——"

"You'll have plenty of time and opportunity to tell the Portsmouth police and the Wrychester police and lots more police all sorts of tales, fairy and otherwise, Melchisedech," I interrupted. "At present, I should advise these constables to keep a tight hold on you, and on those other chaps across there," I added, pointing to the wounded men. "You'll hear all about it presently. Mr. Macpherson, there's another man down here, come and take a look at him."

We walked down to where Kiffin still lay in front of the cottage. He had come round by this time, and the women were ministering to his wants. He gazed at me and Marjorie with

an eye in which there seemed to lurk reproach. But I pointed a stern finger at him.

"This is the man that's really responsible for all this bother and damage," I began. "His name's Kiffin, and he——"

But then old Bowler, who had shuffled across in our wake, suddenly broke in with a voice of scorn.

"Kiffin!" he exclaimed. "That ain't no Kiffin, master! That there man be Ben Flint! Don't I know he, surely! Ah, you was allers a main bad 'un, Ben, wasn't you?—and the last time I see 'ee you was up to 'sizes, and you did get five year! I minds what the ol' judge say to 'ee, ' 'Tis hard,' he say, 'to know what to do with you, Flint,' he say. 'You bin in and out o' gaol,' he say——"

I laid a hand on old Bowler's shoulder.

"So that's Ben Flint, is it?" I said. "Son of old Dan?"

Old Bowler spat vigorously on the turf at his feet—sure sign of emphatic assertion. And before he could reiterate his declaration a man who had come in Macpherson's train spoke.

"Oh, aye, master, that there be Ben Flint right enough!" he said. He turned a sort of

sheepish grin on the subject of our discussion. "How do, Ben?" he continued. "So you be out again, like!"

But Ben Flint looked elsewhere, in silence.

. . . . . .

Two hours later, having left Colstervine's cottage and the quarry in capable hands, Marjorie and I followed the hospitable Mr. Macpherson into his farm-house, away beyond the hill. He showed us into a parlour wherein the table was already laid for breakfast—from somewhere not far off came the refreshing odours of grilling bacon and hot coffee and crisp toast. But far more refreshing was the sight of a cheery fire, and on either side of it two deep-seated, comfortable easy chairs. We sat down in them . . . and looked at each other, as folk who have just come out of strange dreams.

THE END