

CHAPTER VI

THE LONG ARM OF COINCIDENCE

“Go,” said Ella, as she hastened from the room, “and open the door, while I go upstairs and take my hat off.”

Madge did as she was told. There were two persons at the door—Jack Martyn and another.

“This,” said Jack, referring to his companion, “is a friend of mine.”

It was dark in the passage, and Madge was a little flurried. She perceived that Jack had a companion, and that was all.

“Go into the sitting-room, I’ll bring you a lamp in a minute. Ella has gone to take her hat off.”

Presently, returning with the lighted lamp in her hand, placing it on the table, she glanced at Jack’s companion—and stared. In her astonishment, she all but knocked the lamp over. Jack laughed.

“I believe,” he said, “you two have met before.”

Madge continued speechless. She passed her hand before her eyes, as if to make sure she was not dreaming. Jack laughed again.

“I repeat that I believe you two have met before.”

Madge drew herself up to her straightest and her stiffest. Her tone was icy.

“Yes, I rather believe we have.”

She rather believed they had?—If she could credit the evidence of her own eyes the man in front of her was the stranger who had so unwarrantably intruded on pretence of seeking music lessons—who had behaved in so extraordinary a fashion

“This,” went on Jack airily, “is a friend of mine, Bruce Graham,—Graham, this is Miss Brodie.”

Madge acknowledged the introduction with an inclination of the head which was so faint as to be almost imperceptible. Mr. Graham, on the contrary, bent almost double—he seemed scarcely more at his ease than she was.

“I’m afraid, Miss Brodie, that I’ve behaved very badly. I trust you will allow me to express my contrition.”

“I beg you will not mention it,” she turned away; “I will go and tell Ella you have come.”

There came a voice from behind her.

“You needn’t—Ella is aware of it already.”

As Ella came into the room, she moved to leave it. Jack caught her by the arm.

“Madge, don’t go away in a fume!—you wait till you have heard what I have got to say. Do you know that we’re standing in the presence of a romance in real life—on the verge of a blood-curdling mystery? Fact!—aren’t we, Graham?”

Mr. Graham’s language was slightly less emphatic.

“We are, or rather we may be confronted by rather a curious condition of affairs.”

Jack waved his arm excitedly.

“I say it’s the most extraordinary thing. Now, honestly, Graham, isn’t it a most extraordinary thing?”

“It certainly is rather a striking illustration of the long arm of coincidence.”

“Listen to him. Isn’t he cold-blooded? If you’d heard him an hour or two ago, he was hot enough to melt all the ice-cream in town. But you wait a bit. This is my show, and I’ll let you know it. Sit down, Ella—sit down, Madge—Graham, take a chair. To you a tale I will unfold.”

Taking up his position on the hearthrug in front of the fireplace, he commenced to orate.

“You see this man. His name’s Graham. He digs in the same house I do. To be perfectly frank, his rooms are on the opposite side of the landing. You may have heard me speak of him.”

“I have. Often!” This was Ella.

“Have you? You must know, Graham, that there are frequently occasions on which I have nothing whatever to talk about, so I fill up the blanks with what I may call padding. I say this, because I don’t want you to misunderstand the situation. This morning he lunched at the same crib I did. Directly he came in I saw that he was below par; so I said—I always am a sympathetic soul—I do hope, Graham, you won’t forget to let me have an invitation to your funeral—and, in the meantime, perhaps you’ll let me know of what it is you’re dying?’ Now, he’s not one of those men who wear their hearts upon their sleeves for daws to peck at—you know the quotation, and if you don’t, I do; and it was some time before I could extract a word from him, even edgeways. But at last he put down his knife and fork with a clatter—it was distinctly with a clatter—and he observed, ‘Martyn, I’ve been misbehaving myself.’ I was not surprised, and I told him so. ‘I’m in a deuce of a state of mind because I’ve been insulting a lady.’ ‘That’s nothing!’ I replied. ‘I’m always insulting a lady.’—I may explain that when I made that remark, Ella, you were the lady I had in my mind’s eye. At this point I would pause to inquire why, Miss Brodie, you did not take me into your confidence yesterday afternoon?”

“I did.”

“You did not.”

“I did.”

“You told me about the lunatic lady, because, I suppose, you could not help it—since you were caught in the act—but you said nothing about a lunatic gentleman.” He wagged his finger portentously. “Don’t think you deceive me, Madge Brodie—I smell a rat, and one of considerable size.”

“Jack, do go on.”

This was Ella.

“I will go on—in my own way. If you bustle me, I’ll keep going on for ever. Don’t I tell you this is my show? Do you want to queer it? Well, as I was about to observe—when I was interrupted—Graham started spinning a yarn about how he had forced his way into a house, in which there was a young woman all alone, by herself, and, so far as I could make out, gone on awful. ‘May I ask,’ I said, beginning to think that his yarn smelt somewhat fishy, ‘what house this was?’ ‘The place,’ he replied, as cool as a cucumber, ‘is called Clover Cottage.’ ‘What’s that!’ I cried—I almost jumped out of my chair. ‘I say that the place is called Clover Cottage.’ I had to hold on to the hair of my head with both my hands. ‘And whereabouts may Clover Cottage be?’ ‘On Wandsworth Common.’ When he said that, as calmly as if he were asking me to pass the salt, I collapsed. I daresay he thought that I’d gone mad.”

“I began to wonder.” This was Graham.

“Did you? Let me tell you, sir, that as far as you were concerned, I had long since passed the stage of wonder, and had reached the haven of assurance. ‘Are you aware I cried, ‘that Clover Cottage, Wandsworth Common, is the residence of the lady whom I hope to make my wife?’ ‘Good Lord!’ he said. ‘No,’ I screamed, ‘good lady! ‘ I fancy the waiter, from his demeanour, was under the impression that I was about to fight; in which case I should have proved myself mad, because, as you perceive for yourselves, the man’s a monster. ‘It seems to me,’ I said, ‘that if the lady you insulted was not the lady whom I hope to make my wife, it was that lady’s friend, which is the same thing—’ ”

“Is it?” interposed Ella. “You hear him, Madge?”

“I hear.”

“ ‘Which is the same thing,’ ” continued Jack. “ ‘And therefore, sir, I must ask you to explain.’ He explained. I am bound to admit that he explained there and then. He gave me an explanation which I have no hesitation in asserting”—Jack, holding his left hand out in front of him, brought his right fist solemnly down upon his open palm—“was the most astonishing I ever heard. It shows the hand of Providence; it shows that the age of miracles is not yet past; it shows—”

Ella cut the orator short.

“Never mind what it shows; what’s the explanation?”

Jack shook his head sadly.

“I was about to point out several other things which that explanation shows, with a view, as I might phrase it, of improving the occasion, but, having been interrupted for the third time, I refrain. The explanation itself you will hear from Graham’s own lips—after tea. He is here for the purpose of giving you that explanation—after tea. I believe, Graham, I am correct in saying so?”

“Perfectly. Only, so far as I am concerned, I am ready to give my explanation now. I cannot but feel that I shall occupy an invidious position in, at any rate, Miss Brodie’s eyes until I have explained.”

“Then feel! I’ll be hanged if you shall explain now. Dash it, man, I want my tea; I want a high tea, a good tea—at once!”

Ella sprang up from her chair.

“Come, Madge, let’s give the man his tea.”

It was a curious meal—if only because of the curious terms on which two members of the party stood toward each other. The two girls sat at each end of the table, the men on either side. Madge, unlike her usual self was reserved and frosty; what little she did say was addressed to Ella or to Jack. Mr. Graham she ignored, treating his timorous attempts in conversational direction with complete inattention. His position could hardly have been more uncomfortable. Ella, influenced by Madge’s attitude, seemed as if she could not make up her mind how to treat him on her own account; her bearing towards him, to say the least, was chilly. On the other hand, Jack’s somewhat cumbrous attempts at humour and sociability did not mend matters; and more than once before the meal was over Mr. Graham must have heartily wished that he had never sat down to it.

Still, even Madge might have admitted, and perhaps in her heart she did admit, that, under the circumstances, he bore himself surprisingly well; that he looked as if he was deserving of better treatment. Half unconsciously to herself—and probably quite unconsciously to him—she kept a corner of her eye upon him all the time. He scarcely looked the sort of man to do anything unworthy. The strong rough face suggested honesty, the bright clear eyes were frank and open; the broad brow spelt intellect, the lines of the mouth and jaw were bold and firm. The man’s whole person was suggestive of strength, both physical and mental. And when he came to tell the story which Jack Martyn had foreshadowed, it was difficult, as one listened, not to believe that he was one who had been raised by nature above the common sort. He told his tale with a dramatic earnestness, and yet a simple, modest sincerity, which held his hearers from the first, and which, before he had done, had gained them all over to his side.

CHAPTER VII

BRUCE GRAHAM'S FIRST CLIENT

"I don't know," he began, "if Martyn has told you that by profession I am a barrister."

"No," said Jack, as he shook his head, "I have told them nothing to your credit."

Graham smiled; the smile lighting up his features, and correcting what was apt to be their chief defect, a prevailing sombreness.

"I am a barrister—one of the briefless brigade. One morning, about fourteen months ago, I left London for a spin on my bicycle. It was the long vacation; every one was out of town except myself. I thought I would steal a day with the rest. I came through Wandsworth, meaning to go across Wimbledon Common, through Epsom, and on towards the Shirley Hills. As I came down St. John's Hill my tyre caught up a piece of broken glass off the road, and the result was a puncture, or rather a clean cut, nearly an inch in length. I took it to a repairing shop by the bridge. As I stood waiting for the job to be done, two policemen came along with a man handcuffed between them, a small crowd at their heels.

"I asked the fellow who was doing my cycle what was wrong. He told me that there had been a burglary at a house on the Common the night before, that the burglar had been caught in the act, had half-murdered the policeman who had caught him, and was now on his way to the magistrate's court.

"As it seemed likely that the mending of my tyre would take some time, actuated by a more or less professional curiosity, I followed the crowd to the court.

"The case was taken up without delay. The statement that the constable who had detected what was taking place had been half-murdered was an exaggeration as the appearance of the officer himself in the witness-box disclosed. But he had been roughly handled. His head was bandaged, he carried his arm in a sling, and he bore himself generally as one who had been in the wars. My experience, small as it is, teaches that constables on such occasions are wont, perhaps not unnaturally, to make the most of their injuries; and, to say the least, the prisoner had not escaped scot free. His skull had been laid open, two of his teeth had been knocked down his throat, his whole body was black and blue with bruises. Indeed his battered appearance so excited my sympathy that then and there I offered him my gratuitous services in his defence. My offer was accepted. I did what I could.

"However, there was very little that could be done. The burglary, it seemed, had occurred at a place called Clover Cottage."

"Why," cried Ella, "this is Clover Cottage!"

"Yes," said Jack, shaking his head with what he meant to be mysterious significance, "as you correctly observe, this is Clover Cottage. Didn't I tell you you'd see the hand of Providence? You just wait a bit, you'll be dumbfounded."

Mr. Graham continued.

"Clover Cottage it appeared was unoccupied. There were in it neither tenants nor goods. So far as the evidence showed, it contained nothing at all. Being found in an absolutely empty house is not, as a rule, an offence which meets with a severe punishment. I was at a loss, therefore, to understand why my client should have made such a desperate defence and thus have enormously increased the measure of his guilt in the way he had done. Had it not been for what was termed, and perhaps rightly, his assault on the police, the affair would have been settled out of hand. As

it was, the magistrate felt that he had no option but to send the case to trial; which he did do there and then.

“Before his trial I had more than one interview with my client in his cell at Wandsworth Gaol. He told me, by way of explaining his conduct, an extraordinary story; so extraordinary that, from that hour to this, I have never been able to make up my mind as to its truth.

“Under ordinary circumstances I should have had no hesitation in affirming his statement, or rather his series of statements, was a more or less badly contrived set of lies. But there was something about the fellow which assured me that at any rate he himself believed what he said. He was by no means an ordinary criminal type, and there seemed no reason to doubt his assertion that this was the first felonious transaction he had ever had a hand in. He admitted he had led an irregular life, and that he had come down the ladder of respectability with a run, but he stoutly maintained that this was the first time he had ever done anything deserving the attention of the police.

“He was a man about forty years of age; he claimed to be only thirty-six. If that was the fact, then the life he had been living, and the injuries he had recently received, made him look considerably older. His name, he said, was Charles Ballingall. By trade he was a public-house broker; once, and that not so long ago, in a very fair way of business. He had had a lifelong friend—I am telling you the story, you understand, exactly as he told it me—named Ossington—Thomas Ossington. Ballingall always spoke of him as Torn Ossington.”

Ellen looked at Madge.

Madge!” she exclaimed, “how about Tom Ossington’s Ghost?”

“I know.”

Madge sat listening with compressed lips and flashing eyes; that was all she vouchsafed to reply. Mr. Graham glanced in her direction as he went on.

According to Ballingall’s story, Ossington must have been a man of some eccentricity. He was possessed of considerable means—according to Ballingall, of large fortune. But his whole existence had been embittered by the fact that he suffered from some physical malformation. For one thing, he had a lame foot—”

“I know that he was lame.” This was Madge; all eyes stared at her.

“You knew? How did you know?”

“Because she told me.”

Ella’s eyes opened wider.

“She told you? Who?”

“The ghost’s wife.”

“The ghost’s wife!”

“Yes, the ghost’s wife. But never mind about that now. Mr. Graham will perhaps go on.”

And Mr. Graham went on.

“This had preyed upon his spirits his whole life long; and, as his unwillingness to show himself among his fellows increased, it had made of him almost a recluse. He was, however, as it seemed, a man of strong affections, tender heart, and simple disposition. In these respects Ballingall could not speak of him with sufficient warmth. There never had been, he declared, a man like Tom. There was nothing he would not do for a friend—self-abnegation was the passion of his life. Ballingall owned that he owed everything to Ossington. Ossington had set him up in business, had helped him in a hundred ways. In return he (Ballingall) had rewarded him with the most hideous ingratitude. This part of the story was accompanied by such a strong exhibition of remorse that I, for one, found it difficult not to believe in the fellow’s genuineness.

“In spite of his misshapeness, Ossington had found a wife, apparently a lovely one. The man loved her with the single-eyed affection of which such natures as his are capable. She, on the other hand, was as unworthy of his affection as she possibly could have been. From Ballingall’s account she was evil through and through; he could find no epithet too evil to hurl at her. But then it was very possible that he was prejudiced. According to him, this woman, Ossington’s wife, loathing her devoted husband, full to the lips with scorn of him, had deliberately laid herself out to win his (Ballingall’s) love, and had succeeded so completely as to have caused him to forget the mountain-load of gratitude under which he ought to have stumbled, even to the extent of causing him to steal his friend’s wife—the wife who was the very light of that friend’s eyes.

“I think there was some truth in the fellow’s version of the crime—for crime it was, and of the blackest dye. He declared to me that as soon as the thing was done, he knew himself to be the ineffable hound which he indeed was. The veil which the woman’s allurements and sophistries had spread before his eyes was torn into shreds, and he saw the situation in all its horrible reality. She was as false to him as she had been to her husband, and he had been to his friend. In a few months she had left him, having ruined him before she went. From that time his career was all downhill. Remorse pursued him day and night. He felt that he was a pariah—an outcast among men; that an ineffaceable brand was on his brow which would for ever stamp him as accursed. It is possible that under the stress of privation,—for he quickly began to suffer actual privation—his mind became unhinged. But that he had suffered, and was still suffering, acutely, for his crime, the sweat of agony which broke out upon his brow as he told his tale was, to me, sufficient evidence.

“Two or three years passed. He sank to about the lowest depths to which a man could sink. At last, ragged, penniless, hungry, he was refused a job as a sandwich-man because of his incapacity to keep up with his fellows. One night he was on the Surrey side of the Embankment, near Westminster Bridge. It after one o’clock in the morning; shortly before, he had heard Big Ben striking the hour. He was leaning over the parapet in front of Doulton’s factory—you will observe that I reproduce the attention to detail which characterised this portion of his story, such an impression did it make upon my mind. As he stood looking at the water, some one touched him on the shoulder. Supposing it was a policeman who suspected his intentions, he turned hastily round. To his astonishment it was Tom Ossington. ‘Tom!’ he gasped.

“ ‘Charlie!’ returned the other. ‘Come the first thing to-morrow morning to Clover Cottage.’

“Without another word he walked rapidly away in the direction of the Wandsworth Road—Ballingall distinctly noticing, as he went, that his limp had perceptibly diminished. Left once more alone, Ballingall was at a loss what to make of the occurrence. Ossington’s appearance at that particular moment, so far away from home at that hour of the night, was a problem which he found it difficult to solve. He at last decided that the man’s incurable tender-heartedness had caused him to at least partially overlook the blackness of the offence, and to offer his whilom friend succour in the depths of his distress. Anyhow, the next morning found the broken-down wretch in front of Ossington’s house—of this house, as I understand.”

As Mr. Graham said this, for some reason or other at least two of its hearers shivered; Ella clasped her hands more tightly as they lay upon her knee, and the expression of Madge’s wide-open eyes grew more intense. Even Jack Martyn seemed subdued.

“To his indescribable astonishment, the house was empty. A board in the garden announced that it was to be let or sold. As he stood staring, a policeman came along.

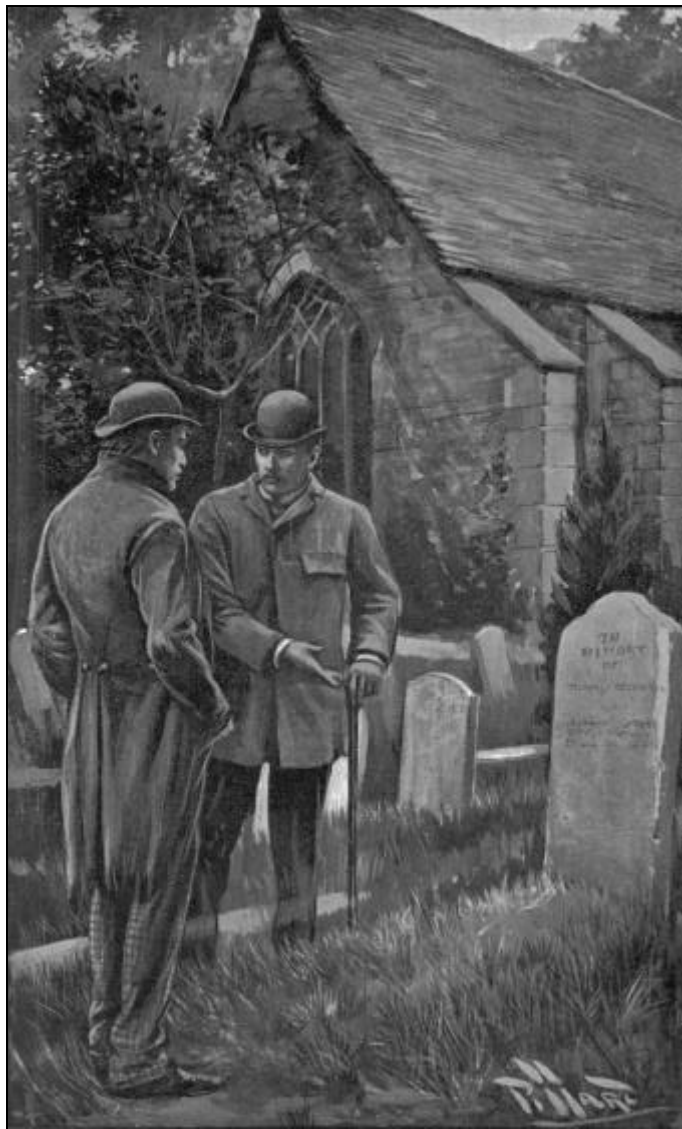
“ ‘Excuse me!’ he said, ‘but doesn’t Mr. Ossington live here?’

“ ‘He did!’ answered the policeman; ‘but he doesn’t now.’

“ ‘Can you tell me where he is living? I want to know because he asked me to call on him.’

“ ‘Did he? Then if he asked you to call on him, I should if I was you. You’ll find him in Wandsworth Churchyard. That’s where he is living now!’

“The policeman’s tone was jocular. Ballingall’s appearance was against him. Evidently the officer suspected him of some clumsy attempt at invention. But as soon as the words were uttered Ballingall staggered back against the wall, according to his own account, like one stricken with death. He was speechless. The policeman, with a laugh, turned on his heel and left him there. Impelled by some influence which he could not resist, the conscience-haunted vagabond dragged his wearied feet to the churchyard. There among the tombstones he found one which purported to be erected to the memory of Thomas Ossington, who had been interred there some two years previously. While he stared, thunderstruck, at the inscription, Ballingall assured me that Tom Ossington stood at his side, and pointed at it with his finger.”



“Tom Ossington stood by his side, and pointed at it with his finger.”

Graham paused. His listeners fidgeted in their seats. It was a second or two before the narrator continued.

“You understand that I am telling you the story precisely as it was told me, without accepting for it any responsibility whatever. I can only assure you that whilst it was being told, I was so completely held, by what I can best describe as the teller’s frenzied earnestness, that I accepted his facts precisely as he told them, and it was only after I got away from the glamour of his intensity of self-conviction that I perceived how entirely irreconcilable they were with the teachings of our everyday experience.

“Thenceforward, Ballingall declared that he was never without a feeling that Ossington was somewhere in the intermediate neighbourhood—to use his own word, that he was shadowing him. For the next week or two he lighted upon somewhat better times. He obtained a job at road—cleaning, and in one way or another managed to preserve himself from actual starvation. But, shortly, the luck ran out, and one night he again found himself without a penny with which to buy either food or lodging. He was struggling up Southampton Street, in the Strand, intending to hang about the purlieus of Covent Garden with the faint hope that he might be able to get some sort of job at the dawn of day, when he saw, coming towards him from the market, Tom Ossington. Ballingall shrank back into the doorway, and, while he stood there shivering, Ossington came and planted himself in front of him.

“ ‘Charlie!’ he said, ‘why didn’t you come to Clover Cottage when I told you?’

“Ballingall protested that he looked and spoke just like a rational being—with the little air of impatience which had always been his characteristic; that there was nothing either in his manner or his appearance in any way unusual, and that there was certainly nothing to suggest an apparition. A conversation was carried on between them just as it might have been between an ordinary Jones and Robinson.

“ ‘I did come!’ he replied.

“ ‘Yes—but you stopped outside. Why didn’t you come inside?’

“ ‘Because the house was empty

“ ‘That’s all you know.’

“ ‘Yes,’ repeated Ballingall, ‘that’s all I do know.’

“ ‘There’s my fortune in that house!’

“ ‘Your fortune?’

“ ‘Yes my fortune; all of it. I brought it home, and hid it away—after Lily went.’

“Lily was his wife’s name. He spoke of her with a sort of gasp. Ballingall felt as if he had been struck.

“ ‘What’s your fortune to do with me?’

“ ‘Everything maybe—because it is yours, if you’ll come and get it; every farthing. It’s anyone’s who finds it, anyone’s—I don’t care who it is. What does it matter to me who has it—now? Why shouldn’t it be yours? There’s heaps and heaps of money, heaps! More than you suppose. It’ll make a rich man of you—set you up for life, buy you houses, carriages and all. You have only got to come and get it, and it is yours. Think of what a difference it’ll make to you—of all that it will do for you—of all that it will mean. It will pick you out of the gutter, and place you in a mansion, with as many servants as you like to pay for at your beck and call. And all yours for the fetching—or anyone’s for the matter of that. But why shouldn’t you make it yours? Don’t be a fool, but come, man, come!’

“He continued urging and entreating Ballingall to come and take for his own the treasures which he declared were hidden away in Clover Cottage, until, turning round, without a farewell word, he walked down the street and disappeared into the Strand.

“Ballingall assured me that he didn’t know what to make of it; and if he was speaking the truth, I quite understand his difficulty. He was aware that, neither physically nor mentally, was he in the best of health, and he knew also that Ossington was continually in his mind. He might be the victim of hallucination; but if so, it was hallucination of an extraordinary sort. He himself had not touched Ossington, but Ossington had touched him. His touch had been solid enough, he looked solid enough, but how came he to be in Southampton Street if he was lying in Wandsworth Churchyard? On the other hand, the story of the hidden fortune was quite in accordance with what he knew of the man’s character. He always had a trick of concealing money, valuables, all sorts of things, in unusual places. And for him to have secreted the bulk of his capital, or even the whole of it, or what represented the whole of it, and then to have left the hiding-place unrevealed, for some one to discover after he was dead and gone, was just the sort of thing he might have been expected to do.

“Anyhow, Ballingall did not go to Clover Cottage the following day. He found a job when the market opened, and that probably had a good deal to do with his staying away. The next night Ossington returned—if I remember rightly, just as Ballingall was about to enter a common lodging-house. And he came back not that night only, but over and over again, so far as I could understand, for weeks together, and always with the same urgent request, that he would come and fetch the fortune which lay hidden in Clover Cottage.

“At last torn by conflicting doubts, driven more than half insane—as he himself admitted—by the feeling that his life was haunted, he did as his mysterious visitor desired—he went to Clover Cottage. He hung about the house for an hour. At last, persuaded that it was empty, he gained admission through the kitchen window. No sooner was he in than a constable who, unconsciously to himself had been observing his movements with suspicious eyes, came and found him on the premises. The feeling that, after all, he had allowed himself to be caught in something that looked very like a trap, bereft Ballingall of his few remaining senses, and he resisted the officer with a degree of violence which he would not have shown had he retained his presence of mind.

“The result was that instead of leaving Clover Cottage the possessor of a fortune, he left it to be hauled ignominiously to the station-house.”

CHAPTER VIII

MADGE . . . AND THE PANEL

“And is that all the story?” asked Ella, for Mr. Graham had paused.

“All of it as it relates to Ballingall. So far as he was concerned, it brought his history up to date.”

“And what became of him?”

“He was tried at the Surrey Sessions. There was practically no defence—for, of course, I could not urge on his behalf the wild story he had told me. All I could do was to plead extenuating circumstances. He was found guilty, and got twelve months.”

“And then?”

“Then I came in—that was my first brief, and my last. Although I could not see my way to shape his story into the form of any legal plea, still less could I erase it from my mind. Never had I heard such a tale before, and never had I listened to a man who had so impressed me by his complete sincerity as Ballingall had done when telling it. He had struck me as being as sane as I myself was; had used commonplace words; had not gone out of his way to heighten their colour; but had simply told the thing straight on, exactly as it occurred. I felt convinced that, from his own point of view, the affair was genuine.

“Months went by, and still the story stuck in my brain. I found myself putting propositions of this kind. There was a house called Clover Cottage, and there had lived in it a man named Ossington, an avowed eccentric—for I had made inquiries in the neighbourhood, and had learned that he had been regarded thereabouts as more or less insane. Suppose, in this empty house of his, he had hidden something which was more or less valuable, for which there existed no actual owner, nor any designated heir. What then?”

The speaker paused again. Then spoke more softly. On his countenance the shadows seemed to deepen.

“You must understand that I am a poor All the world that knows me is conscious of my poverty, but none but myself is aware poor I really am. I have felt, and feel, that if I can only hold on, I shall win my way in my profession yet. But it is the holding on which is so difficult. Some time ago I came to the end of my resources, and during the last year I have been living from hand to mouth. Had I had my time more fully occupied I should have been able to banish from my mind the man’s queer story; or had I seen my way to earn money sufficient to supply my daily needs, anyhow, without forfeiting my right to call myself a professional man, and so barring that gate to my future advancement; my thoughts would not have turned so frequently to that possibly hidden, useless hoard. I was frequently conscious that the whole thing might be, and probably was, a pure phantasm, and that there was no such hoard, and never had been; but, at the same time I was persuaded that Ballingall had not been a conscious liar.

“Things came to such a pitch that I found myself in possession of less than ten shillings, and with nothing pawnable on which to raise the wind—you must forgive my entering on these details, but it is absolutely necessary if you are to have a complete comprehension of my position. This, I told myself, was absurd, and if there really was something hidden at Clover Cottage worth having, which could be had for the finding, it was absurder still. I started then and there with a half-formed resolution to put the matter to a final test, and to look for myself. I reached Clover Cottage—to find that it was occupied. There was a plate outside, announcing that lessons were given in music. My mind had been in a tolerable state of confusion when I started. I was conscious of the apparent of my quest; and that consciousness had not grown less as I went on. The discovery that the house was tenanted made my confusion worse confounded. More than half ashamed of my errand, I was wholly at a loss what to do. While I hesitated, I chanced to glance up, and there, a few yards down the road, was . . . Ballingall.”

“I knew it was Ballingall.”

This was Madge.

Ella turned on her.

“You knew it was Ballingall?—How did you know it was Ballingall? It seems to me that you know everything.”

“Miss Brodie,” observed Bruce Graham, “very naturally draws her own conclusions. The sight of him turned me into a drivelling idiot. In the confusion of my mind his appearance on the scene at that particular moment seemed nothing short of supernatural. I felt as if I had been guilty of

some act of treachery towards him, and as if he had sprung from goodness alone knew where to catch me in the very act. I blundered through the gate, knocked at the door and almost forced my way into the house.”

“You did almost force your way into the house.”

Madge’s tone was grim.

“I’m afraid I did—and, being in, I blurted out some nonsense about being in search of music lessons, and generally misbehaved myself all round. As a climax, just as I was about to put an end to my intrusion, I saw Ballingall staring at me through the window. I would not have encountered him then for all the hidden hoards the world contains. I entreated Miss Brodie—to permit me to make my escape through the back door—and she did.”

“Yes, and insulted you as you went.”

Graham rose from his seat.

“You behaved to me, Miss Brodie, infinitely better than I deserved. You would have been perfectly justified in summoning a policeman, and giving me into charge. I can only thank you for your forbearance. I assure you of my most extreme penitence. And while I cannot expect that you will forgive me at once—”

“But I do forgive you.”

Madge had also risen.

“Miss Brodie.”

“Of course I do. And I did behave badly—like a wretch. But why didn’t you explain?”

“You saw what, at the moment, was my capacity to explain, and now you perceive how extremely complicated the explanation would have had to be.”

“But to think,” cried Ella, “that we should be in the very centre of a mystery.”

Jack struck in. “Exactly—living in the very heart of it; Surrounded by it on every side; having it staring you in the face whichever way you turn. What did I tell you? Isn’t it blood-curdling? Like the man says in the song—you really never do know where you are.”

Ella glanced at Madge.

“The burglary last night—do you think?”

“Of course it was.”

“Ballingall?”

“Without a doubt.”

“But, my dear, how can you be so sure?”

“He was hanging about all day—he tried again last night; it’s as plain as it possibly can be.”

Jack, puzzled, had been looking from one to the other.

“Perhaps you will tell us what is as plain as it possibly can be.”

Ella turned to him.

“There was another burglary last night.”

“Where?”

“Here—in the very middle of the night.”

“Upon my honour!—this appears to be—Graham, this really does appear to be a pleasant house to live in. The delights of the country, with the horrors of town thrown in.—Did you catch the ruffian?”

“Madge heard him first.”

“Oh—Madge heard him first?”

“Yes, and then she came and told me—”

“Where was he all the time?”

“Wait a bit, and I’ll tell you. Then we both of us heard him—then Madge fired—”

“Fired?—what?”

“Your revolver.”

“Gracious!—did she hit him?”

“She never saw him.”

“Never saw him! Then what did she fire at?”

“Well—”

Ella stopped, as if somewhat at a loss. So Madge went on.

“I fired to let him know he was discovered. I believe the bullet lodged in the roof.”

“Heavens! what a target.”

“He took the hint, and did not wait to be made a target of himself.”

“Then didn’t you see him at all?”

“Through the window, as he was running down the road.”

“Did you give the alarm?”

“We were in our night-dresses.”

“Why, he might have murdered the two of you if he had liked.”

“He might, but he didn’t.”

Madge’s tone was dry. Ella put her hand up to her ears.

“Jack!—don’t talk like that; I’ve been shivering ever since. You can’t think what a day I’ve had in town, thinking of Madge in the house all alone.”

“My dear girl.” He put his arm about her waist, to comfort her. “And you think that it was—Graham’s friend.”

“It was Charles Ballingall.”

This was Madge; Ella was less positive.

“My dear, how can you be so certain? You only caught a glimpse of the man’s back in the darkness.”

“He has committed burglary here before. his presence in the daytime is followed by another burglary that same night. Isn’t the inference an obvious one? Don’t you think so, Mr. Graham?”

“It looks exceedingly suspicious. To convince a jury of his innocence he would have to prove an alibi.”

“The burglar, whoever it was—and for the sake of argument we’ll say that we don’t know—took nothing with him, but he left something behind him, a piece of paper with writing on it. When the police came to-day—”

“Do you mean to say that the police have been here to-day?”

“Certainly—or, rather, a sample of them. And a lot of good he did, or is likely to do. I gave him the original piece of paper, but not before I had copied what was on it. Here is the copy. What do you make of it, Mr. Graham?”

Madge handed a sheet of paper to the gentleman addressed. As he looked at it Jack, too impatient to wait his turn, leaned over his elbow to look at it too.

“My stars! ‘Tom Ossington’s Ghost!’ Large as life! Here’s thrillers. What’s that? ‘Right—straight across—three four—up!’ Here’s mysteries! ‘Right—cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—dog—cat—dog—left eye,—push’—there seem to be several dogs after a good few cats. Perhaps it is my stupidity, but, while it’s very interesting, I don’t quite see what it means.”

Madge paid no attention to Martyn. She kept her eyes fixed on his companion.

“What do you make of it, Mr. Graham?” she asked.

Bruce Graham continued silent for a moment longer, keeping his eyes fixed upon the paper. Then he looked up and met her glance.

"I think that we have here the key of the riddle, if we could only read it."

"If we could only read it!"

"Nor, from a superficial glance, should I imagine that that would be very difficult."

"Nor I."

"One thing it seems to me that this paper proves—that you were correct in your inference, and that last night's burglar was Charles Ballingall."

"I am sure of it."

"You two," interposed Martyn, "appear to be in thorough agreement—thorough! Which is the more delightful since you began by disagreeing. But you must excuse my saying that I don't quite see where the cause for harmony comes in."

"Are you so stupid?"

"My dear Madge! Don't strike me! It's constitutional."

"Don't you see what the situation really is?"

"Well—pardon me—but—really, you are so warm, Miss Brodie. If this gentleman were to allow me to study this interesting document, I might."

"Somewhere in this house, the dead man, Tom Ossington, concealed his fortune, all that he had worth having. It is as clear as if I saw the actual hiding place."

"My gracious goodness! Is it?"

"It is within a few feet of where we're standing. At this moment we're 'hot,' I know—I feel it!"

"Listen to that now! Madge, you must have second sight."

"That scrap of paper contains, as Mr. Graham puts it, the key of the riddle. It's a minute description of the precise whereabouts of the dead man's hiding place. All we have to do is to find out what it means, and if we are not all idiots, that shouldn't be hard. Why, you've only got to see the house; you've only to look about you, and use your eyes, to at once perceive that it's honeycombed with possible hiding places—just the sort of crevices and crannies which would commend themselves to such a man as this Tom Ossington. Look at this very room, for instance; it's wainscotted. That means, probably, that between the outer wall and the wainscot there's an open space—and who knows what beside? Listen!" She struck the wainscot in question with her open palm. "You can hear it has a hollow backing. Why"—she touched it again more gently, then stopped, as if puzzled—"why, the wood-work moves." She gave a little cry, "Ella."

"Madge?"

They came crowding round her, with eager faces.

CHAPTER IX

THE THING WHICH WAS HIDDEN

She had placed her hand against a portion of the wainscoting which was about level with her breast. As, in her excitement, she had unconsciously pressed it upwards, the panel had certainly moved. Between it and the wood below there was a cavity of perhaps a quarter of an inch.

"Push it! Push it higher!"

This was Jack. Apparently that was just what Madge was endeavouring to do, in vain.

"It won't move. It's stuck—or something."

Mr. Graham advanced.

“Allow me, perhaps I may manage.

She ceded to him her position. He placed his huge hand where her smaller one had been.

He endeavoured his utmost to induce the panel to make a further movement.

“Put your fingers into the opening,” suggested Jack, “and lever it.”

Graham acted on the suggestion, without success. He examined the panel closely.

“If it were ever intended to go higher, the wood has either warped, or the groove in which it slides has become choked with dust.”

Ella was peeping through the opening.

“There is something inside—there is. I don’t know what it is, but there is something—I can see it. Oh, Mr. Graham, can’t you get it open wider!”

“Here, here! let’s get the poker; we’ll try gentle persuasion.”

Jack, forcing the point of the poker into the cavity, leant his weight upon the handle. There was a creaking sound—and nothing else.

“George! it’s stiff! I’m putting on a pressure of about ten tons.”

As he paused, preparatory to exerting greater force, Madge, brushing him aside, caught the poker from him. She drove the point against the wainscot with all her strength—once, twice, thrice. The wood was shivered into fragments.

“There! I think that’s done the business.”

So far as destroying the panel was concerned, it certainly had. Only splinters remained. The wall behind was left almost entirely bare. They pressed forward to see what the act of vandalism had disclosed.

Between the wainscot and the party-wall there was a space of two or three inches. Among the cobwebs and the dust there was plainly something—something which was itself so encrusted with a coating of dust as to make it difficult, without closer inspection, to tell plainly what it was.

Ella prevented Jack from making a grab at it.

“Let Madge take it—it’s hers—she’s the finder.”

Madge, snatching at it with eager fingers, withdrew the something from its hiding-place.

“Covered,” exclaimed Jack, “with the dust of centuries!”

“It’s covered,” returned the more practical Madge, “at any rate with the dust of a year or two.”

She wiped it with a napkin which she took from the sideboard drawer.

“Why,” cried Ella, “it’s nothing but a sheet of paper.”

Jack echoed her words.

“That’s all—blue foolscap—folded in four.”

Madge unfolded what indeed seemed nothing but a sheet of paper. The others craned their necks to see what it contained. In spite of them she managed to get a private peep at the contents, and then closed it hastily.

“Guess what it is,” she said.

“A draft on the Bank of Elegance for a million sterling.” This was Jack.

“I fancy it is some sort of legal document.”

This was Graham. Ella declined to guess.

“Don’t be so tiresome, Madge; tell us what it is?”

“Mr. Graham is right—it is a legal document. It’s a will, the will of Thomas Ossington. At least I believe it is. If you’ll give me breathing space I’ll read it to you every word.”

She drew herself away from them. When she was a little relieved of their too pressing importunities, she unfolded the paper slowly—with dramatic impressiveness.

“Listen—to a voice from the grave.”

She read to them the contents of the document, in a voice which was a trifle shaky:—

“I give and bequeath, absolutely, this house, called Clover Cottage, which is my house, and all else in the world which at present is, or, in time to come, shall become my property, to the person who finds my fortune, which is hidden in this house, whoever the finder may chance to be.

“I desire that the said finder shall be the sole heir to all my worldly goods, and shall be at liberty to make such use of them as he or she may choose.

“I do this because I have no one else to whom to leave that of which I am possessed.

“I have neither kith nor kin—nor friend.

“My wife has left me, my friend has betrayed me; my child is dead.

“I am a lonely man.

“May my fortune bring more happiness to the finder than it has ever brought to me.

“God grant it.

“This is my last will and testament.

“(Signed) THOMAS OSSINGTON,
“October the twenty-second, 1892.

“In the presence of EDWARD JOHN HURLEY,
Solicitor’s Clerk,
13, Hercules Buildings, Holborn.
And of LOUISA BROOME,
2, Acacia Cottages, Battersea
(Maid-servant at present in the employ
of the said Thomas Ossington).”

The reading was followed by silence, possibly the silence of amazement. The first observation came from Jack.

“By George!”

The next was Ella’s.

“Dear life!”

For some reason, Madge’s eyes were dim, and her tone still shaking.

“Isn’t it a voice from the grave?” She looked down, biting her lower lip; then up again. “I think, Mr. Graham, this may be more in your line than ours.”

She handed him the paper.

He read it. Without comment he passed it to Jack, who read it with Ella leaning over his shoulder. He placed it on the table, where they all four gathered round and looked at it.

The paper was stained here and there as with spots of damp. But these had in no way blurred the contents.

The words were as clear and legible as on the day they were written. The caligraphy was small and firm, and a little finical, but as easy to read as copperplate the handwriting of a man who had taken his time, and who had been conscious that he was engaged on a weighty and a serious matter. The testator’s signature was rather in contrast with the body of the document, and was bold and strong, as if he had desired that the witnesses should have no doubt about the fact that it was his name he was affixing.

Edward John Hurley’s attestation was in a cramped legal hand, expressionless, while Louisa Broome’s was large and straggling, the sign-manual of an uneducated woman.

Jack Martyn asked a question, addressed to Graham.

“Is it a will?—a valid one, I mean?”

“Looking at it on the surface, I should say certainly—if the witnesses can be produced to prove the signatures. Indeed, given certain circumstances, even that should not be necessary. The man expresses his wishes; their meaning is perfectly plain; he gives reasons for them. No testator need do more than that. What may seem the eccentric devising of his property is, in his position, easily accounted for, and is certainly consistent with entire sanity. Thousands of more eccentric documents have been held to be good in law. I have little doubt—if the testator’s signature can be proved—that the will is as sound as if it had been drawn up by a bench of judges.”

Madge drew a long breath. Jack was jocular, or meant to be. “Think of that, now!”

“But I don’t see,” said Ella, “that we’re any forwarder now, or that we’re any nearer to Madge’s mysterious hoard. The will—if it is a will—says that the fortune is hidden in the house, but it doesn’t give the faintest notion where. We might pull the whole place to pieces and then not find it.”

“Suppose the whole affair is a practical joke?”

Mr. Graham commented on Jack’s insinuation.

“I have been turning something over in my mind, and I think, Martyn, that I can bring certain facts to bear upon your supposition which will go far to show that it is unlikely that there is much in the nature of a practical joke about the matter. I want to call attention to Miss Brodie’s copy of the paper which the burglar left behind last night—to the second line. Now observe.” He crossed the room. “The paper says ‘Right’—I have the door-post on my right, close to my right arm. The paper says ‘straight across’—I walk straight across the room. Miss Brodie, have you a tape measure?”

Madge produced one which she ferreted out of a work-basket which was on a chair in a corner.

“The paper says ‘three’—I measure three feet from where I am standing, along the wainscot—you see? It says ‘four’—I measure four feet from the floor. As you perceive, that measurement brings us exactly to the panel behind which the will was hidden. The paper says ‘up.’ As Miss Brodie showed, there can be no doubt whatever that the panel was meant to move up. Owing to the efflux of time and to disuse, it had become jammed. Does not all this suggest that we have here an explanation of part of what was written on the burglar’s paper?”

“It does, by George! Graham,” cried Jack, “I always did know you had a knack of clarifying muddles. Your mental processes are as effective, in their way, as a handful of isinglass dropped into a cask of muddy beer. Ladies, I give you my word they are.”

Martyn was ignored.

“If, therefore, part of the paper is capable of explanation of such a striking kind, does it not seem probable that the rest of it also has a meaning—a meaning which does not partake of the nature of a practical joke?”

“The idea,” declared Madge, “of a practical joke is utter nonsense. As you say, everything points the other way. It is as clear as anything can be that, while one part of the paper is a key to the hiding-place of the will, the other is the key to the hiding-place of the fortune.”

“Very well,” said Jack. “Let’s grant it. I stand snubbed. But perhaps you’ll tell us what is the key to the key?”

“That’s another question.”

“Very much another question.”

“But it needn’t be an insoluble one, if we use our wits. The house isn’t a large one it isn’t as though it contained a hundred rooms.”

Mr. Graham had been studying the scrap of paper.

“This allusion to cats and dogs seems a striking one. I notice that each word is repeated five times. Is there anything about the house which gives you a hint as to the meaning?”

Madge replied to the question with another.

“Is there anything in this room which gives you a hint? Look around and see.”

“I have been looking round, and I confess there isn’t. Nor do I think it likely that the fortune would be hidden in the same room which contained the will.”

“Very well; then we’ll all of us go over the house together, and we’ll all of us look out for hints.

Madge led the way, and they went over the house.

It was a tiny one. Behind the solitary sitting-room was the kitchen. The kitchen was an old-fashioned one, with brick floor, and bare brick walls coloured white. In one corner a door led into the pantry; in another was a door into the scullery; there was nothing remarkable about either of these. Under the staircase was a roomy cupboard. They examined it with some thoroughness, by the aid of a lamp, without discovering anything out of the way. On the floor above were the bedrooms used by Ella and Madge, and a smaller room in which they stored their lumber. The walls of these were papered from floor to ceiling, and in none of them did there seem to be anything calculated to convey a hint as to the meaning of the cabalistic allusion.

“It seems to me,” observed Jack, when the work of exploration was completed, “that there’s nothing about these premises breathing of either dogs or cats.”

“It is just possible,” said Graham, “that they may be in the grounds. For instance, several of them may be buried there, and the reference may be to one of their graves.

“Then do you propose to dig up the whole of the back garden till you light upon their hallowed bones?”

Graham smiled.

“I propose to do nothing.”

Madge struck in.

“But I do; I mean to do a great deal. I’m going to strip all the wainscot off the sitting-room wall, and all the flooring up as well. And I’m going to continue that process till we reach the roof. I’m absolutely certain—absolutely certain, mind you!—that that unhappy man’s hoard is somewhere within the four walls of this house, and I give you my word that I mean to find it.”

“How about the landlord?” asked Graham. “What about his feelings? By the way, who is the landlord?”

“We’re the landlord, Ella and I—or, at any rate, we very soon shall be.”

“But in the meantime?”

“I don’t know anything about a landlord. We took the house from Parker and Beading, the house agents over by the station.”

“They would probably be acting for some principal. Did they not tell you his name?”

“They told us nothing. We took the house from them, and the supposition is that we’re to pay the rent to them.”

“If you will allow me, I’ll take the will away with me—if you will trust me with it—and obtain expert opinion as to its validity. I will also call on Messrs. Parker and Beading, and ascertain, if possible, on whose authority they are acting.”

“When will you do this?”

“The agents I will call upon to-morrow, and will acquaint you, by letter, with the result.”

“You will do nothing of the kind—or, rather, I would prefer that you did not. Both Ella and I would prefer that you should come and tell us the result in person—that is if you can spare the time.”

Mr. Graham bowed, expressing acquiescence in the lady’s wishes. And on that understanding the matter was left.

When the two men had gone, Ella faced Madge with sparkling eyes.

“Suppose, Madge, there should be a fortune hidden somewhere in the house?”

Madge was scornful.

“Suppose!—there’s no supposition about it. It’s a certainty, I know there is.”

“And suppose you should find it—it would be yours. What would you do with it?”

“What a question! We shall find it all four of us together. It will be share and share alike.”

“What—Mr. Graham too?”

Possibly the question was put maliciously. It provoked Miss Brodie to wrath.

“Mr. Graham too? Ella, what can you mean? If it hadn’t been for Mr. Graham we should have known nothing whatever about it. I suppose that, in strict equity, the whole of it would be his. Whatever can you mean by saying ‘Mr. Graham too?’ in such a tone as that!”

“My dear, I meant no harm. Really you’re a trifle warm—don’t you think you are?”

“Warm! It’s enough to make any one a trifle warm to hear you talk like that.”

Ella made a little face behind Miss Brodie’s back.

“Well, fortune or no fortune, I do hope that no more burglars will come and look for it again to-night.”

“If they do,” declared Madge, with a viciousness which presaged violence, “they’ll not find us unprepared. I shall sleep with Jack’s revolver at my bedside, and if you like you can have half my bed again.”

Ella’s manner was much more mild.

“Thank you, my dear; since you’re so good—I think I will.”

CHAPTER X

MADGE FINDS HERSELF IN AN AWKWARD SITUATION

There was no burglar. The night was undisturbed; and the next day was, for both, a busy one.

The morning post brought Madge an intimation from a publisher to whom she had submitted one of her MSS., that he would be obliged if, when she was in town, she would call on him, so that she might discuss with him terms for its publication. That business-like memorandum made her heart beat faster; sent the blood coursing quickly through her veins; added a sparkle to her eyes. This, after all, was the sort of fortune she preferred—one for which she had striven with her own brains and hands—better than hidden hoards! The simple breakfast became an Elysian feast.

Ella was almost as jubilant as she herself

“Northcote & Co.? That’s a good house, isn’t it?”

“Rather. They published—” Madge reeled off the names of two or three pronounced fictional successes.

“How much do you think they’ll give you for it?”

“In cash?—not much; don’t you think I shall bring home the Bank of England. So long as they give me a fair share of anything it may ultimately bring, I’ll be content. But it isn’t that; it’s getting the first footing on the ladder—that’s the thing.”

“Of course it is. How splendid! And I’ll tell you what; you shall dedicate it to me, and then if it sells by the hundred thousand, I shall have a bit of your fame.”

“Done!—and your name upon the flyleaf ought to help to sell the book: it’s as well known as mine is, anyhow. The author’s spoken—you shall be the dedicatee?”

They went up to town together. Ella had to be at her office at half—past nine, and it is true that that seemed a trifle early to make a call upon a publisher. But, as Ella correctly observed, “You can look at the shops until it is time.”

Which is precisely what Madge did do.

And it is remarkable how many things she saw in the shop windows which she mentally resolved to purchase if the book succeeded. Such an unusual number of useful things seemed to be displayed. And it certainly is odd what a quantity of them were just the articles which Ella and she particularly required.

Her interview with the publisher was a delightful one. She agreed to everything he proposed. His propositions were not quite on the scale of magnificence which she had conceived as being within the range of possibility. But still, they were near enough to be satisfactory. She was to have a sum of money paid her on the publication of the book—not a large sum, but still something. And there was to be royalty besides. When she hinted, almost as if she had been hinting at something of which she ought to be ashamed, that if part of the money were paid before publication it would be esteemed a favour, that publisher went so far as to draw a cheque for half the amount, and to hand it to her then and there. It is a fact that Madge Brodie was an uncommonly pretty girl—but such an accident was not likely to make any impression on the commercial instincts of a creature who battens upon authors. She went straight off and cashed that cheque. When she had the coin in her pocket—actually in her pocket—she felt the financial equal of a Rothschild. She lunched all by herself at a restaurant in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross—and a nice little lunch she had; made some purchases, with one eye on Ella and another on herself; and then she went. and gave a music lesson to Miss Clara Parkins, whose father is the proprietor of the Belvedere Tavern—that well-known hostelry, within a hundred miles of Wandsworth Common.

Miss Parkins was within a year or two of her own age, an uncommonly shrewd young woman, and a pleasant one to boot. The lesson had not been proceeding two minutes before she perceived that something was disturbing the ordinarily tranquil currents of her teacher’s mind. When the lesson was finished, she made a valiant effort to find out what that something was.

She looked down, and she picked at the nap of her frock, and she asked, a tone or two under her usual key:

“What is it? I wish you’d tell me.”

Madge stared; nothing which had gone before had led to such a question.

“What is what?”

“What is it which makes you—all brimming over?”

Madge went red. She was an arrant little snob, and by no means proud of giving music lessons to a publican’s daughter—although that publican’s daughter was the best paying pupil she had, and not the least agreeable. She was on her stilts in a moment.

“I don’t understand you.”

“That’s a story. Of course it’s no business of mine. But you do seem so happy, and I think that sharing other people’s happiness is almost as good as being happy yourself—don’t you? But I’m awfully sorry I asked.”

Miss Parkins' air of contrition melted Madge's mood. As she adjusted her veil, she condescended to explain.

"I have had rather a stroke of luck."

"I'm awfully glad to hear it. Of course I know you think nothing of me; but I think no end of you. I do hope that some one has left you a fortune."

"I like it as well as if some one had, though I daresay you'll think it's nothing. I've sold a book."

"A book? Oh!—one of your own writing? I knew you were clever. When is it coming out?"

"We've hardly got so far as dates."

"When it does come, I'll buy a dozen and pay for them, if you'll give me one with your name inside."

"I'll give you the one without there being the necessity for your buying the dozen."

"I knew you'd say that. I know you don't think I'm good enough to buy your book. But I don't mind. I hope it will be a success."

"That's very kind of you."

"And it will be, I'm sure of it. You're the sort that does succeed."

"How do you make that out?"

"I don't know exactly—but you are. You've got the air of success about you. I noticed it when first I spoke to you. And when people have got the air of success, you'll generally find that they get the thing itself."

"You student of the world!"

She stooped and kissed the girl. It was the first familiarity they had exchanged. Miss Parkins put her arms about her neck and kissed her in return—a half quizzical something in her eyes.

"You mark my word—you're the sort that does succeed!"

Madge walked home with an added feeling of elation. She laughed at the girl's pretension to what almost amounted to prophetic insight—yet wondered if there might not be something in what she said. At any rate it was nice to be believed in, even by Miss Parkins. She felt that she had done the young woman an injustice. A publican's daughter, after all, is flesh and blood. If the book succeeded, should opportunity offer, she would place it upon public record that Clara Parkins had foretold its success—which would be fame for Clara. She smiled at her own conceit. The possibility that she might one day become an important person only loomed on the horizon since the advent of that note in the morning.

Immersed in such thoughts, almost unwittingly she arrived at Clover Cottage. Inserting her latchkey in the keyhole, she turned and opened the door. Almost as soon as she did so, it was thrust violently back on her, and banged in her face. She was so startled that, for a second or two, she stared at the closed door as if in doubt as to what had really happened. She had been, in imagination, so far away that it required positive effort on her part to bring herself back to earth.

"Well," she muttered, below her breath, "that's cool. I wonder who did that. Perhaps it was the wind."

She did not stay to consider how the wind could have behaved in such an eccentric manner. She gave her key another twist, and the door a push. But the key refused to act, or to move, in the direction required, and the door stood still. This, under the circumstances, singular behaviour of the key and the door, seemed to rouse her to a clearer perception of the situation. She gave the key a further twist, exerting all her strength.

"What is the matter? It turned easily enough just now."

It would not turn then, try how she might, and the door would not budge.

“Can the catch have fallen? I don’t see how; it has never done anything of the kind before. I wonder if some one’s having a joke with me; perhaps Ella has returned.”

Acting on the supposition, though it was two hours in advance of the time at which Miss Duncan might be generally expected, she knocked at the door. None answered. She knocked again—louder. If Ella was having a jest at her expense it was hardly to be expected that she would put an end to the joke by answering her first summons. She knocked again and again—without result.

“This is charming—to be locked out of my own house is not what I expected.”

She drew back, in order to survey the premises. Nothing was to be seen.

“Perhaps I’d better try the back door. Since the front seems hermetically closed, the back may be open for a change.”

But it was not. She rattled at the handle; shook the door; rapped at the panels with her knuckles. No one heeded her. She returned to the front—with a curious feeling of discomfiture.

“What can have happened? It’s very odd. The door opened easily enough at first—it felt as if some one had pulled it from within. I wonder—Hullo! that’s the time of day is it? I saw that curtain move. I fancy now, Miss Ella Duncan, that I’ve caught you—you are amusing yourself inside. I’ll give that knocker a hammering which I’ll engage to say you shall hear.”

She was as good as her word—so far as the hammering was concerned. She kept up a hideous tattoo for some three or four minutes without cessation. But though it is not impossible that the din was audible on the other side of the Common, within none heeded. She was becoming annoyed. Going to the sitting-room window, she tapped sharply at the frame.

“Ella, I saw you! Don’t be so silly Open the door! You’ll have all the neighbourhood about the place. It’s too bad of you to keep me outside like this.”

It might be too bad; but the offender showed no sign of relenting. Madge struck her knuckles against the pane with force enough to break the glass.

“Ella!”

Still silence.

“How can you be so stupid—and unkind! Ella, open the door! Or is it you, Jack? Don’t think I didn’t see you, because I did—I saw you move the curtain.”

She might have done, but the curtain was motionless enough now. Madge was losing her temper fast. In her estimation, to be kept out of the house like this was carrying a sufficiently bad joke a good deal too far.

“If you don’t open the door at once, I shall break the glass and let myself in that way!”

She assailed the window-pane with a degree of violence which suggested that she meant what she said; then flattened her nose against it in an endeavour to discover who might be within. While she peered, the door was opened, and some one did come in. She started back.

“Who on earth—”

She was going to say. “Who on earth is that?” But when she got so far, she stopped—because she knew. At least in part.

First through the door there came a woman. And, although she could scarcely credit the evidence of her own eyesight, in her she recognised the visitor of the day but one before—the creature who had persisted in calling herself “the ghost’s wife.” At her heels there was a man, a perfect stranger to Madge. Having recognised the woman, she looked to see in her companion the loafer of the previous afternoon—but this certainly was not he. This was a miserable, insignificant-looking fellow, very much down at heel—and apparently very much down at

everything else. The woman, with impudent assurance, came striding straight to the window. The man hung back, exhibiting in his bearing every symptom of marked discomfort.

The female, as brazen-faced as if she was on the right side of the window, stared at Madge. And Madge stared at her—amazed.

So amazed, indeed, that for a moment or two she was at a loss for words. When they came at last, they came in the form of an inquiry.

“What,” she asked, “are you doing there?”

The woman waved her hand—in fact, she waved both her hands—as if repelling some noxious insect.

“Go away!” she cried; “go away! This house is mine—mine!”

Madge gasped. That the creature was mad, at the best, she made no doubt. But that conviction, in the present situation, was of small assistance. What was she to do?

As she asked herself this question, with no slight sense of helplessness, the gate clicked behind her. Some one entered the garden.

It was Bruce Graham.