CHAPTER XI

UNDER THE SPELL

"Graham" she exclaimed. "Really, I do believe that if I had been asked what thing I most desired at this particular moment, I should have answered—you!"

Graham's sombre features were chastened by a smile.

"That's very good of you."

"Look here!" Laying one hand against his arm, with the other she pointed at the sitting-room window. His glance followed her finger-tips.

"Who's that?"

"That's what I should very much like to ascertain."

"I don't quite follow you. Do you mean that you don't know who she is?"

"I only know that I've been away all day, and that on my return I find her there. How she got there I can't say—but she seems determined to keep me out."

"You don't mean that! And have you no notion who the woman is? She looks half mad."

"I should think she must be quite mad. It's the woman who forced herself into the house the day before yesterday after you had gone—that's all I know of her. This time she is not alone; she has a man in there with her."

"A man! Not—Ballingall?"

"No, not Ballingall. At least, I only caught a glimpse of him—but it's not the man who was watching you. From her behaviour the woman must be perfectly insane."

"We'll soon make an end of her, insane or not."

Graham went to the window. The woman, completely unabashed, had remained right in front of it, an observant spectator of their proceedings. He spoke to her.

"Open the door at once!"

She repeated the gesture she had used to Madge—raising her voice, at the same time, to a shrill scream.

"Go away! go away! This house is mine—mine! I don't want any trespassers here." Graham turned to Madge.

"Do you authorise me to gain an entry?"

"Certainly. I don't want to spend the night out here."

Permission was no sooner given than the thing was done. Grasping the upper sash of the window with both his hands, Graham brought it down with a run, tearing away the hasp from its fastening as if it had been so much thread. It was a capital object-lesson of the utility of such a safeguard against the wiles of a muscular burglar. The upper sash being lowered, in another moment the lower one was raised. Mr. Graham was in the room. The woman was possibly too astonished by the unceremonious nature of his proceedings to attempt any resistance, even had she felt disposed.

Graham addressed Miss Brodie through the window.

"Will you come this way? or shall I open the door?"

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd rather you opened the door."

He opened the door. Presently they were in the sitting-room, face to face with the intruders. Graham took them to task—the woman evincing no sign of discomposure.

"Who are you, and what is the meaning of your presence on these premises?"

“This house is mine—mine! It’s all of it mine! And who are you, that you ask such a question—of a lady?”

She crossed her hands on her breast with an assumption of dignity which, in a woman of her figure and scarecrow-like appearance, was sufficiently ludicrous. Graham eyed her as if subjecting her to a mental appraisement. Then he turned to the man.

“And pray, sir, what explanation have you to offer of the felony you are committing?”

This man was a little, undergrown fellow, with sharp hatchet-shaped features, and bent and shrunken figure. He had on an old grey suit of clothes, which was three or four sizes too large for him, the trousers being turned up in a thick roll over the top of an oft-patched pair of side-spring boots. There was about him none of the assurance which marked the woman—the air of bravado which he attempted to wear fitted him as ill as his garments.

“I ain’t committed no felony, not likely. She asked me to come to her house—so I come. She says to me, ‘You come along o’ me to my house, and I’ll give you a bit of something to eat.’ Now didn’t you?”

“Certainly. I suppose a gentleman is allowed to visit a lady if she asks him.”

The dreadful-looking woman, as she stood with her head thrown back, and her nose in the air, presented a picture of something which was meant for condescension, which was not without its pathos.

“Of course!—ain’t that what I’m saying? She come here, and she took a key out of her pocket, and she put it in the keyhole, and she opened the door, all quite regular, and she says, ‘This here’s my house,’ and she asked me to come in, so of course I come in.

“Do you mean to say that she gained entrance to this house by means of a key which she took from her pocket?”

“Course! How do you suppose we came in?—through the window? Not hardly, that’s not my line, and so I tell you.”

Graham returned to the woman.

“Be so good as to give me the key with which you obtained admission to these premises.”

The woman put her hand up to her neck, for the first time showing signs of discomposure.

“The key?”

Starting back, she looked about her wildly, and broke into a series of shrill exclamations.

“The key!—my key!—no!—no!—no—It is all I have left—the only thing I’ve got. I’ve kept it through everything—I’ve never parted from it once. I won’t give it you—no!”

She came closer to him, glaring at him with terrible eyes.

“It’s my key—mine! I took it with me when I went that night. He was sitting in here, and I came downstairs with the key in my pocket, and I went—and he never knew. And I’ve kept it ever since, because I’ve always said that one day when I went back I should want my key to let me in: I hate to have to stand on the step while they are letting me in.”

Mr. Graham was regarding her intently, as if he was endeavouring to read what stood with her in the place of a soul.

“Is your name Ossington?”

“Ossington? Ossington?” She touched the sides of her forehead with the tips of her fingers, glancing about her affrightedly, as if making an effort to recall her surroundings. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Who said Ossington? Who said it? Who asked if my name was—Ossington?”

Mr. Graham addressed Miss Brodie.

“With your permission I should like to speak to this woman—after the man has gone.”

In his last words there was meaning.

"By all means, if you wish it. Get rid of him at once. At the best the fellow is an impudent intruder, and the story he tells is a ridiculously lame one. He must have been perfectly well aware that a woman of this sort was not likely to possess a house of her own, and that accepting what he calls her invitation he was committing felony."

The fellow in question shook his head as if he felt himself ill-used.

"I call that hard—cruel hard. If the young lady was to think of it for half a moment she'd see as it was cruel hard."

"The young lady declines to think of it. Have the goodness to take yourself away, and consider yourself lucky that you are allowed to escape scot free."

The man moved towards the door, endeavouring to bear himself as if he were doing so of his own free will. He spoke to the woman.

"Ain't you coming with me?"

"Yes, I'm coming."

She hastened towards him. Graham interposed.

"Let him go. There are one or two things about which we should like to speak to you, this young lady and I, after he has gone."

But she would have none of him. Shrinking back, she stared at him, in silence, for a second or two; then began to shriek at him like some wild creature.

"I won't stay!—I won't!—I shall go!—I shall! You tried to get my key—my key You touch it—you dare! You asked me if my name"—she stopped, stared about as if in terror, gave a great sigh, "You asked me if my name—"

She stopped again—and sighed again, the pupils of her eyes dilating as she watched and listened for what was invisible and inaudible to all but her. Graham moved forward, intending to soothe her. Mistaking, apparently, his intention, she rushed at him with outstretched arms, giving utterance to yell after yell. In a moment she was past him and flying from the house.

Her male companion, who stood still in the doorway, pointed his thumb over his shoulder with a grin.

"There you are, you see—drove her out of her seven senses! So you have."

Much more leisurely, the man went after the woman.

For some reason, when Mr. Bruce Graham and Miss Brodie were left alone, nothing was said about the recent visitors.

"If you'll sit down and wait," remarked Miss Brodie, "I'll go and take my things off."

Having returned from performing those sacred offices, the topic still remained untouched. Possibly that was because there were so many things which needed doing. When one has been out all day, and keeps no maid, when one returns there are things which must be done. For instance, there was a fire to make. Miss Brodie observed that there ought to have been two, one in the kitchen, and one in the sitting-room; but declared that folks would have to be content with one.

And that one Bruce Graham made.

She brought in the wood, and the coal, and the paper; and then she went to fetch the matches. When she returned she caught him in the act.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

He was on his knees on the hearthrug, with some sticks in his hand.

"Making a fire—on scientific principles. I'm a scientific expert at this kind of thing. Women's methods are unscientific as a rule."

“Indeed.” Her air was scornful. “Men always think they can make fires. It’s most surprising.”

She commented on his methods—particularly when he took the pieces of coal from the scuttle, and placed them in their places with his fingers.

“That’s right! Men always use their fingers to put coal on the fire—if they can. It’s an agreeable habit.”

He continued calm.

“It’s scientific, strictly scientific; and may be logically defended, especially when a fire is being lighted. Heaping on coal with a shovel is unscientific—in the highest degree.”

He struck a match; presently the paper was in flames.

“Now you had better go and wash your hands. You’ll have to do it in the scullery; and by the time you’re done, the fire will be out.”

But the fire was not out. It was a complete success. The kettle was put on, preparations were made for tea, and the table was laid, Graham showing a talent for rendering assistance which was not accorded the thanks it might have been. Madge was chilly.

“I should imagine you were rather a handy person to have about the house.”

“There are diversities of gifts; let us hope that each of us has at least one.”

“Exactly. But, unfortunately, I do not care to see a man, what is called, ‘making himself useful about the house’—if your gift lies in that direction. I suppose it is because I am not enough of a New Woman. Perhaps now you’ve given me your assistance in laying the cloth, you will give me some music.

He was smoothing a corner of the cloth in question—and looked down.

“It is you who are the teacher.”

She flashed up at him.

“What do you mean by that?”

“It is true—is it not?

“If you wish me to understand that you would rather not play, have the goodness to say so plainly.”

Whereupon he sat down—and played. And Madge listened.

When he stopped, she was looking away from him, toward the fire. Tears were in her eyes.

“I suppose you are a genius?”

Her voice seemed a little strained. He shook his head.

“No—the music comes out of the ends of my fingers.”

He went on playing. When he ceased, again she turned to him—with passionate eyes.

“I never heard any one play like you before.”

“It’s because I’m in the mood.”

He played on. It seemed to her that he spoke to her out of the soul of music. She sat still and listened. Her heart-strings tightened, her pulses throbbed, her cheeks burned; every nerve in her frame was on the alert. Never had such things been said to her before. She could have cried—and would have cried, if she had dared. The message breathed to her by Bruce Graham’s playing told of a world of which she, unconsciously, had dreamed.

He played; and she sat and listened, in the firelight, till Ella came home to tea.

And with Ella came Jack Martyn.

CHAPTER XII

TOM OSSINGTON S LAWYER

It was while they were seated at table that Bruce Graham told them of the result of his investigations. Although, for some reason, the subject had not been mentioned when Madge and he had been alone together, that young lady showed herself alert and eager enough then. Nor, in that respect, was Ella behind her friend, while Martyn concealed an interest which was probably equal to theirs under ponderous attempts at jocularity.

It was Jack who brought him to the point.

"If the honourable and learned gentleman has sufficiently refreshed himself with the cup that cheers, would he oblige the company by mentioning if he has done anything in the matter of the Hidden Treasure—with capitals please!—and, if so, what?"

"I have at least found that everything points to there being such a hidden treasure—in spite of Jack's pretended scepticism."

"My pretended scepticism! Sir, I would have you know that I am no sceptic; or, if I am, never was one more willing to be converted to the faith."

Ella interposed.

"And, Mr. Graham, you really think there is a hidden treasure?"

"I think it extremely probable."

"Tell us all about it. What have you been doing? All day long I have been dreaming in the City of what would happen if we did light upon a secret hoard. It really would be too splendid for words."

The young lady looked the eagerness which the words suggested—like an imaginative child who pictures the materialisation of some favourite tale of faerie.

"To begin with, I went to the house agents to learn for whom they are acting."

"Well, and what did they say?"

"They were not particularly willing to say anything—as I expected. They were apparently under the impression that I intended to take the bread out of their mouths, by dealing with their principals direct. But when I had succeeded in, at any rate, partly reassuring them, they informed me they were acting for a firm of solicitors—Messrs. Nicholls & Hawkins, 3, South Square, Gray's Inn."

"Well, and what did you do then?"

I went to the solicitors."

"It is awfully good of you to take so much trouble. And what did they say?"

"As it happened, I had some knowledge of the firm. My father was on terms of friendship with their senior partner, so that when I introduced myself to Mr. Nicholls as my father's son, the way was smoothed for me. They have the reputation of being a steady-going, old-fashioned firm, and I found them as open and above-board as they very well could have been. When I mentioned my errand, Mr. Nicholls was all alive at once.

" 'Messrs. Palmer & Beading, of Wandsworth,' I began, 'inform me that in letting Clover Cottage they are instructed by you. May I ask who is the owner of the property?

"When I said that, he sat up straight in his chair, and, as I observed, became all alive—oh.

" 'May I inquire, in return, why you ask the question?'

" 'The question,' I admitted, 'is a little irregular; but I take it that you will have no objection to give me an answer.'

“ ‘Not the slightest. On the contrary, we shall be delighted if you will help us to throw light into what is, at present, a very dark corner; because, as a matter of fact, so far as we are concerned, there is no owner.’

“ ‘The late Thomas Ossington died intestate!’

“ ‘So far as our knowledge goes.’

“ ‘Leaving instructions that you should act on his behalf?’

“ ‘Not a bit of it. So far as we’re aware, he left no instructions of any sort or kind. We have assumed a responsibility of which we should be glad to be rid. Do you know the man’s history?’

“ ‘I know something of it—though I confess, candidly, that I should like to know more. My own connection with the matter is a curious one. At a later stage I will tell you exactly what it is. In the interim, I assure you, on my word of honour, that any information you can give mc shall be used for the furtherance of justice, and for that only.’

“ ‘Very good; so long as right is done, all that we require is to be relieved of a very awkward situation. You know that Ossington was—peculiar?’

“ ‘Not insane?’

“ ‘Insane?—No; he was as sane as you are—every whit. But he was a disappointed man. He was malformed—the muscles of one leg were paralysed. As he grew older, the paralysis increased, until it extended up the whole of one side, and, at last, it killed him. He married a girl who acted as book-keeper at an hotel, at which he was in the habit of stopping, at Ilfracombe. She turned out a regular bad lot—finally running away with a man named Ballingall.’

“ ‘Charles Ballingall?’

“ ‘That’s the man. Do you know him?’

“ ‘I have acted for him professionally.’

“ ‘Have you? Then let me inform you, without prejudice, that you have acted for as rascally a scamp as ever trod the earth. Ossington regarded him as a particular friend; and, as particular friends sometimes have a knack of doing, he borrowed no end of money from Ossington, ending by robbing him not only of his money, but of his wife as well. The double blow almost broke Ossington’s heart, and during the remainder of his existence he lived the life of a recluse. But, until then, we had acted for him continually. For instance, we had acted for him in the purchase of Clover Cottage.’

“ ‘Do you hold the deeds of the house?’

“ ‘Not a deed. We hold nothing. All that we have are the various letters which he wrote to us at various times, on business. We had heard nothing of him for months, when one morning we received a telegram asking us to go at once to Clover Cottage. I went myself—I liked the man. He was, in his way, as fine a gentleman as I ever met. He had been cruelly used by friend and fortune. I found him dead—alone in the house there, with a maid and a doctor; dead—killed, according to the medical testimony, by a paralytic affection of the heart; but actually, as sure as you and I are alive, by the wicked wanton usage of those he had held dear. Now here the queer part of the thing comes in.

“ ‘ His last words had been an instruction to send for us; but that was the only instruction he had given. I myself searched the house from top to bottom, and, as you know, it is not a large one. I had it searched by others—every nook and cranny. Not a scrap of writing could be discovered—letter, note, or memorandum. Not a document of any sort of kind. Nothing whatever to show of what he had died possessed, or to whom it was to go.

“ ‘You had reasons to suppose that he had means?’

“ ‘Every reason! We had every reason to believe him to be a man of comfortable means. We ourselves had, on more than one occasion, acted for him in matters involving thousands of pounds. We applied to the National and Provincial Bank—where we were aware he had an account. They informed us that he had closed the account some two months previously, and that on that occasion they had handed him over six thousand pounds in notes on the Bank of England. They gave us a list of the numbers of the notes; and not one of them has been presented for payment to this day.’

“ ‘Is that so?’

“ ‘It is. We furnished the Bank with a copy of the list, requesting them to notify us should one of them come in: as yet not a single one of them has made its appearance. Where are those notes? Surely, if they were in the possession of any living person, ere this some of them would have been presented. Where are the title deeds of Clover Cottage—and of other properties, of which he was the undoubted owner? He is the registered holder of ten thousand Great Northern Railway Stock. Since his death, the dividends on it have remained unclaimed. Where is the scrip? With the rest, has it vanished into air? In a box in his bedroom were forty-seven pounds in gold. That was all the cash the house contained. We buried him in Wandsworth Cemetery; Hawkins, I, and the doctor were the only mourners. We sold the furniture, paid the expenses, and the balance stands to the credit of the estate. We advertised for next of kin, without results. We advertised also for information as to the whereabouts of any property of which he might have died possessed—such as title-deeds, and anything of that kind. You understand that there is a delicate question as to who is entitled to collect the rents of other properties which we believe to have been his freehold. But nothing came of that. Clover Cottage we placed in the hands of Messrs. Parker and Beading, but only recently have they succeeded in letting it—I believe to two single ladies.’

“ ‘So I understand.’ ”

Jack struck in.

“You are the two single ladies. You,” pointing to Ella, “are one of them, and you,” pointing to Madge, “are the other.”

Ella was impatient.

“Jack, I do wish you wouldn’t interrupt.—Mr. Graham, do go on. It’s like a romance. My curiosity is such that I feel as if I were all pins and needles.”

Bruce Graham continued.

“ ‘And you, Mr. Nicholls,’ I said, ‘have you formed no theory of your own upon the subject?

“Old Nicholls leaned back in his chair. He put his hands into his two pockets, and he looked at me out of the corners of his eyes.

“ ‘I have—I have formed a decided theory. But, upon my word, I don’t know what right you have to ask me.’

I trust, before we part, to prove to your entire satisfaction that I have every right. What’s the nature of your theory?’

“ ‘What’s the nature of your right?’

“I laughed. I saw that he meant to understand more clearly where we stood before he went any further.

“ ‘ I believe I am in a position to produce an owner for the property—when found.’

“ ‘When found?’

“ ‘Precisely—when found. As yet it still remains to be found. I must ask you not, at this moment, to press me for further details, and of course you, on your part, are entitled to keep your theory to yourself.’

“ ‘I am entitled to keep my theory to myself, as you say. But I know your father was an honest man, and as it happens, I know something about you, and I believe you also are an honest man. So as I am anxious, for many reasons, that this Ossington mystery should be unravelled, you shall have my theory for what it’s worth.’

“He tilted his chair on to its hind-legs, watching me keenly all the time.

“ ‘Thomas Ossington was peculiar—not, in any sense of the word, insane, but out of the common run. In particular he was secretive, especially latterly, as perhaps was only natural. My theory is that, distrusting banks and all such human institutions, he secreted his cash, his title deeds, and everything he valued, in some hiding-place of his own contriving, and that there it remains concealed unto this hour.’

The two girls rose simultaneously.

“Madge,” cried Ella, “did you hear that? That’s exactly what you said.”

In Madge’s tones there was the ring of an assured conviction.

“I was sure of it—and I am sure of it; as sure as any one possibly can be.”

“May I ask,” inquired Jack, with mock severity, “who is it who is interrupting now? Will you let the gentleman go on?”

Graham went on.

“ ‘But where,’ I said, ‘do you think he is likely to have found such a hiding-place?’

“Old Nicholls looked at me, if possible, more shrewdly than ever.

“ ‘At Clover Cottage. I knew the man. The salient events of his life happened there. In his whimsical way he regarded it as part and parcel of himself. I have heard him say so half a dozen times. His heart was in the place. Whatever he did conceal, was concealed within its four walls. Before the furniture was sold, I had it overhauled by an expert—some of the things were pulled to pieces. His verdict was that nothing was hidden there. Had I had my way I would have dismantled the whole house—only Hawkins was against me. He said very properly, that if the heir-at-law proved cantankerous, I might be made to smart in damages to the tune of a pretty penny. So I abstained. All the same, if the house was in the market to-morrow, I’d be a purchaser at a good round sum—if all rights of treasure trove went with it. You may tell the present tenants’—here he looked at me in a fashion which took me a little aback—‘if you have the honour of their acquaintance, that we keep a sharp eye on the property; that it is not to be tampered with to the extent of one jot or tittle; and that not so much as one inch of paper is to be taken off the wall except with our express permission.’

Ella turned to Madge.

“What do you say to that?” she exclaimed. “That knocks on the head all your notions of pulling the house to pieces.”

Madge was defiant.

“Does it? It does nothing of the kind. Not after what I found in this very room last night. In the face of that, I care nothing for Mr. Nicholls, or for his threats either. What do you think yourself, Mr. Graham?”

“If you will allow me, I will give you my own opinion when I have told you of all that passed between Mr. Nicholls and myself. Indeed, I am now coming to that very point.”

“There you are, you see. You will not let the man finish, you really won’t. I never saw anything like you women for interrupting—never in all my life.”

This of course was Jack—who was, as usual, ignored.

Graham brought his story to an end.

" 'There is one more question', I said, 'which I should like to ask you, Mr. Nicholls. Do you know any one of the name of Edward John Hurley?'

I ought to, seeing that some one of the name of Edward John Hurley is in our office at this moment, and has been in our office for something over a quarter of a century.'

" 'Can I see him?'

"Mr. Nicholls touched a bell, and presently Mr. Hurley entered. I felt that his presence on the spot was a stroke of luck for which I had certainly been unprepared. He was a tall, thin, dignified looking man, with grey hair. He wore spectacles. Taking them off, he wiped them with his handkerchief before he replaced them on his nose to look at me.

" 'Do you remember, Mr. Hurley,' I began, 'the 22nd of October, 1892?'

" 'The 22nd of October, 1892?' He repeated my words, then replied to my question with another. 'May I inquire why you ask?'

" 'I will put my question in another form. Do you remember witnessing Mr. Thomas Ossington's attachment of his signature to a certain document on the 22nd of October, 1892?'

"I had noticed that Mr. Nicholls and he had exchanged glances when I first put my query. Now he looked at his principal evidently in search of guidance.

" 'Shall I answer this gentleman's question, sir?'

" 'Certainly. Give him all the information you can.'

"This Mr. Hurley proceeded to do, with the utmost clearness.

" ' I do remember the 22nd of October, 1892, and the whole of the circumstances. I chanced to meet Mr. Ossington in Holborn as I was leaving the office. He asked me if I would dine with him in his house at Wandsworth. I went with him to dinner there and then. After dinner he asked me if I would witness his signature. I expressed my willingness. I witnessed it.'

" 'Were you acquainted with the nature of the document he was signing?'

" 'I was not. I have often wondered what it was, especially in the light of after events. The document, which was on a sheet of blue foolscap, had evidently been prepared before my arrival Mr. Ossington, covering the writing with a piece of blotting-paper, signed it, in the middle of the page, directly underneath, while I affixed my signature, as witness, on the left-hand side.'

" 'Was there another witness?'

" 'There was, the servant girl.'

" 'What was her name?'

" ' I never heard it. I only know that he called her Louisa. I think I should recognise her if I saw her again. She was a red-faced, light-haired, strapping wench, about eighteen years of age.'

" 'Should you recognise Ossington's signature—and your own—and the document to which they were attached?

" 'Most decidedly; under any circumstances, at any time.'

"I thanked him for his frankness, and rose to go. Nicholls stopped me.

" 'One moment,' he said. 'Hurley informed us, at the time, or what he has just now told you, and, like him, we have frequently wondered what was the nature of the document he witnessed. As you are evidently aware that such a paper existed once upon a time, you are probably acquainted with its present whereabouts?'

" 'I am. It will be produced in due course. When, I promise you, you will see as curious a document as is to be found upon the records.'

"Both Nicholls and Hurley endeavoured to induce me to be more definite. But I was not to be persuaded. Thanking them for the information they had given me, I came away.

CHAPTER XIII

AN INTERRUPTED TREASURE HUNT

"Well," inquired Martyn, when Graham had finished, "what is the situation now?"

"First of all," struck in Madge, "how about the will?"

"As regards the will, I do not hesitate to say that it is as sound and valid a declaration of the testator's wishes as has been admitted to probate—Mr. Hurley's testimony removes all doubt upon that point. A man has a right to do what he will with his own—and that is all Mr. Ossington has done."

"How does it effect our right of search?"

"That is another question. The will gives neither you nor any one else a title for the destruction of property. It simply conveys to the finder the possession of certain things which are not specifically mentioned. But it authorises no one to look for those things, still less to do damage while looking."

"Then is our search barred? Aren't we to look at all?"

"I don't say that. My advice is to put the legal aspect aside, and to regard the common-sense one only. The will says that certain things, when found, are to become the property of the finder, and this house with them. You have reason to believe that those things are concealed within this house. Then it is for you to consider whether it is worth your while to run the risk of becoming responsible for any damage you may do in case of your failure to find those things. My opinion is, that it is worth your while to run that risk—that it is worth any one's while to run that risk."

Madge stood up, with resolute lips, and sparkling eyes. She struck her hand upon the table.

"I'm sure it is! I know it is!"

Bruce Graham also rose.

"I am willing to share the risk if it is shareable—or to assume the whole of it, for the matter of that. I incline strongly to your belief, Miss Brodie, that there is something hidden well worth the finding, and that its hiding-place is within the walls of Clover Cottage."

Jack Martyn hammered his fist upon the table.

"Hear, hear!—bravo!—spoken like a man! 'Pon my word, I'm beginning to think that there is something in it after all. A conviction is creeping over me, slowly but surely, that in less time than no time I shall be filling my pockets with the contents of Aladdin's Cave—and as there is only a bent sixpence and two bad pennies in them at present, there's plenty of room for more."

"The point is," said Ella, "where are you going to begin to look?"

"I am going to do what Mr. Nicholls wanted to do," declared Madge—"tear the house to pieces."

"But, my dear, even if you set about the business in that drastic fashion, you'll require method. How are you going to begin to take the house to pieces—by taking the slates off the roof, and the chimney-pots down?"

"And by taking the windows out of their frames, and the doors off their hinges, and displaying the grates in the front garden George! you'll be improving the property with a vengeance if you do."

"I propose to do nothing so absurd. I simply wish you to understand that before I give up the search the house will literally have been torn to pieces—though I assure you, Ella, that I do not intend to begin by taking off either the slates or the chimney-pots."

"Have you been able to make anything more of the writing which was left behind by your burglarious visitor?"

The inquiry came from Graham. Madge shook her head.

"Let me try my hand at it," cried Jack. "I have brains—I place them at your service. It is true I never have been able to solve a puzzle from my very earliest hours, but that is no reason why I should not begin by solving this."

The scrap of paper was given him. He spread it out on the table in front of him. Leaning his head upon his hands, he stared at it, the expression on his face scarcely promising a prompt elucidation.

"The first part is simple, extremely simple. Especially after Mr. Graham's last night's lucid exposition. Otherwise I should have described it as recondite. But the second part's a howler; yes, a howler! 'Right—cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—left eye—push!' The conjunction is surprising. I can only remark that if that assorted collection of animals is bottled up somewhere in this house all together, that alone would be a find worth coming upon. There will be some lively moments when you let the collection out."

"Did you mention anything to Mr. Nicholls about the paper?" asked Madge of Graham.

"Not a syllable. I gathered from what he said that the house was done up before it was let—papered, painted, and so on, and that therefore any former landmarks to which it might have been alluding have probably disappeared."

"That's what I think, and that's what I mean by saying we shall have to pull the house to pieces."

"Even if that is the case, as Miss Duncan puts it, where are you going to begin? You must remember that you will have to continue living in the house while it is being dismantled, and that you must spare yourselves as much discomfort as possible."

"It seems that you have to begin by pushing the left eye," said Jack, who still was studying the paper. "Though whether it is the left eye of the entire assorted collection is not quite clear. If that is the case, and that remarkable optic has to be pushed with any degree of vigour, I can only say that I shall take up a position in the centre of the road till the proceedings are concluded."

"Why not commence," asked Madge, "with a thorough examination of the room which we're now in?"

"You yourself," said Ella, "admitted last night that it was hardly likely that the treasure would be hidden in the same room which contained the will."

Madge pursed her lips and frowned.

"I've been thinking about that since, and I don't at all see why we should take it for granted. One thing's certain, the room is honeycombed with possible hiding-places. There are hollows behind the wainscot, the walls themselves sound hollow. That unhappy man can hardly have found a part of the house better adapted to his purpose."

"See there—what's that?" Ella was pointing to a kind of plaster cornice which ran round the room. "What are those things which are cut or moulded on that strip of beading, if it is beading, under the ceiling?"

"They look to me like some sort of ornamental bosses," said Graham.

"They certainly are neither cats or dogs," decided Madge.

"I'm not so sure of that; you know what extraordinary things they tell you are intended to represent things which are not in the least bit like them. Where's that paper? Jack, give me that paper."

Jack gave it her. She glanced at it.

" 'Right'—I'll take up a position like you did last night, Mr. Graham, to the right of the door; 'cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—' now—"

"Well?" queried Madge, for Ella had stopped. "Now what?"

"I think," continued Ella, with evident dubitation, "that I'll again do what you did last night, Mr. Graham, and cross right over though it says nothing about it here, but perhaps that was omitted on purpose." She marched straight across the room. "Now we'll take the first thing upon the beading, or whatever it is, to be a cat, and we'll count them alternately—cat—dog—the fifth dog."

"Very good," said Graham, standing close up to the wall and pointing with his outstretched hand, "Cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—here you are."

"Now, 'left eye—push.' "

"Or shove," suggested Jack.

"But there is no eye—whether left or otherwise."

"That's a detail," murmured Jack.

"Let me see." Ella clambered on to a chair. From that position of vantage she examined the protuberances in question.

"There really does seem nothing which could represent an eye; the things look more like knuckle-bones than anything else."

"What's the odds? Let's all get hammers and whack the whole jolly lot of them in the eye, or where, if right is right, it ought to be. And then, if nothing happens—and we'll hope to goodness nothing will—we'll whack 'em again."

"I'm afraid, Ella," put in Madge, "that your cats and dogs are merely suppositions. I vote, by way of doing something practical, that we start stripping the wainscot. You'll find hiding-places enough behind that, and it's quite on the cards, something in them."

"Certainly," assented Jack, "I am on. Bring out your hatchets, pickaxes, crowbars, and other weapons of war, and we'll turn up our shirt-sleeves, and shiver our timbers, and not leave one splinter of wood adhering to another. Buck up, Graham! Take off your coat, my boy! You're going to begin to enjoy yourself at last, I give you my word."

Ella, possibly slightly exacerbated by the failure of her little suggestion, endeavoured to snub the exuberant Mr. Martyn.

"I don't know if you think you're funny, Jack, because you're only silly. If you can't be serious, perhaps you'd better go; then, if we do find something, you'll have no share."

"Upon my Sam!" cried Jack, "if that ain't bitter hard. If there's any sharing going on, I don't care what it is, if there's any man who wants his bit of it more than I do, I should like you to point him out. Ella, my dearest Ella, I do assure you, by the token of those peerless charms——"

"Jack, don't be silly."

"I think," insinuated Madge, "that you and I, Mr. Graham, had better go and fetch a chisel and a hammer."

They went. When they returned, bearing those useful implements, however the discussion might have gone, Mr. Martyn showed no signs of being crushed.

“Give me that chisel,” he exclaimed. “You never saw a man handle a tool like me—and to the last day of your life you’ll never see another. I’m capable of committing suicide while hammering in a tack.”

“Thank you, Jack,” said Madge; “but I think carpentering may be within the range of Mr. Graham’s capacity rather than yours.”

At least Mr. Graham showed himself capable of stripping the wainscot, though with the tools at his command—those being limited to the hammer and the chisel, with occasional help from the poker—it was not so easy a business as it might have been. It took some time. And, as none of the hoped-for results ensued—nothing being revealed except the wall behind—it became a trifle tedious. Eleven o’clock struck, and still a considerable portion of the wainscot was as before.

“Might I ask,” inquired Jack, “if this is going to be an all night job; because I have to be at the office in the morning, and I should like to have some sleep before I start.”

Graham surveyed the work of devastation.

“I will finish this side, and then I think, Miss Brodie, we might leave the rest to another time—till to-morrow, say.”

“I really don’t see what’s the use of doing it at all,” said Ella. “I don’t believe there’s anything hidden in this room; and look at the mess, it will take hours to clear it up. And who wants to live in a place with bare brick walls? It gives me the horrors to look at them.”

Madge looked at her, more in sorrow than in anger.

“I think, Mr. Graham, that perhaps you had better stop.”

He detected the mournful intonation.

“At any rate, I’ll finish this side.”

He continued to add to the uncomfortable appearance of the room; for there certainly was something in what Ella said.

He had worked for another quarter of an hour, or twenty minutes, and had torn off three or four more strips of wood—for they had been firmly secured in their places, and took some tearing—and the others were gathered round them, assisting and looking on, momentarily expecting that something would come to light better worth having than dust and cobwebs, of which articles there were very much more than sufficient, when Ella gave a sudden exclamation.

“Madge! Jack!” she cried. “Who—who’s this man?”

“What man?” asked Madge.

Turning, she saw.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CAUSE OF THE INTERRUPTION

What she saw, and what they saw, spoke eloquently of the engrossed attention with which they had watched the work of destruction being carried on. So absorbed had they been in Bruce Graham’s proceedings that, actually without their knowledge, a burglarious entry had been all but effected into the very room in which they were.

There was the proof before them.

The window had been raised, the blind and curtains pushed away, and a man’s head and shoulders thrust inside.

When Ella's exclamation called their attention to the intruder's presence, they stared at him, as well they might, for a moment or two with stupefied amazement; the impudence of the act seemed almost to surpass the bounds of credibility. He, on his part, met their gaze with a degree of fortitude, not to say assurance, which was more than a little surprising.

To the fellow's character his looks bore evidence. The buttoning of his coat up to his chin failed to conceal the fact that his neck was bare, while the crushing of a dilapidated billycock down over his eyes served to throw into clearer relief his unshaven cheeks and hungry-looking eyes.

For the space of perhaps thirty seconds they looked at him, and he at them, in silence. Then Jack moved hastily forward.

"You're a cool hand!" he cried.

But Madge caught him by the arm.

"Don't!" she said. "This is the man who stared through the window."

Jack turned to her, bewildered.

"The man who stared through the window? What on earth do you mean?"

"Don't! " she repeated. "I think that Mr. Graham knows this man."

The man himself endorsed her supposition.

"Yes, I'm rather inclined to think that Mr. Graham does."

His voice was not a disagreeable one; not at all the sort of voice which one would have expected from a person of his appearance. He spoke, too, like an educated man, with, however, a strenuous something in his tone which suggested, in some occult fashion, the bitterness of a wild despair.

Seeing that he remained unanswered, he spoke again.

"What's more, if there is a cool hand it's Mr. Graham, it isn't me. I am a poor, starving, police-ridden devil, being hounded to hell, full pelt, by a hundred other devils—but, Bruce Graham, what are you?"

They turned to the man who was thus addressed.

At the moment of interruption he had been levering a strip of wainscot from its place with the aid of the inserted chisel. He still kept one hand upon the handle, holding the hammer with the other, while he drew his body back against the wall as close as it would go, and, with pallid cheeks and startled eyes, he stared at the intruder as if he had been some straggler from the spiritual world. From between his lips, which seemed to tremble, there came a single word—"Ballingall!"

"Yes, Ballingall! That's my name. And what's yours—cur, hound, thief? By God there have been people I've used badly enough in my time, hut none worse than you've used me."

"You are mistaken."

"Am I? It looks like it. What are you doing here?"

"You know what I'm doing."

"By God! I do—you're right there. And it's because you know I know, that, although you're twice my size, and have got all the respectability and law of England at your back, you stand there shivering and shaking, afraid for your life at the sight of me."

"I am not afraid of you. I repeat that you are mistaken."

"And I say you lie—you are afraid of me,. penniless, shoeless, hungry beggar though I am. Your face betrays you; look at him! Isn't there cowardice writ large?"

The man stretched out his arm, pointing to Graham with a dramatic gesture, which certainly did not tend to increase that gentleman's appearance of ease.

"Do you think I didn't see you the other day, knowing that the time was due for me to come out of gaol, trying to screw your courage to the striking point to play the traitor; how at the sight of me the blood turned to water in your veins? Deny it—lie if you can."

"I do not wish to deny it, nor do I propose to lie. I repeat, for the third time, that in the conclusions you draw you are mistaken. Miss Brodie, this is the person of whom I was telling you—Charles Ballingall."

"So you have told them of me, have you? And a pretty yarn you've spun, I bet my boots. Yes, madam, I am Charles Ballingall, lately out of Wandsworth Prison, sent there for committing burglary at this very place. My God, yes! this house of haunting memories of a thousand ghosts! I only came out the day before yesterday, and that same night I committed burglary again—here! And now I'm at it for the third time, driven to it—by a ghost! And, my God! he's behind me now. A sudden curious change took place in the expression of the fellow's countenance. Partially withdrawing his head, he turned and looked behind him—as if constrained to the action against his will. His voice shrank to a hoarse whisper.

"Is that you, Tom Ossington?"

None replied.

Madge moved forward, quite calm, and, in her own peculiar fashion, stately, though she was a little white about the lips, and there was an odd something in her eyes.

"I think you had better come inside—and, if convenient, please moderate your language."

At the sound of her voice the man turned again, and stared.

"I beg your pardon. Were you speaking to me

"I was, and am. Mr. Graham has spoken to me of you, and I am quite certain that in doing so he has told us nothing but the exact and literal truth. In the light of what he has said, I know that I am giving expression to our common feeling in saying that we shall feel obliged to you if you will come in."

The man hesitated, fumbling with his hands, as if nonplussed.

"It's a good many years since I was spoken to like that."

"Possibly it's a good many years since you deserved to be spoken to like that. As a rule, that sort of speech is addressed to us to which we are entitled."

"That's true. By God, it is!"

"I believe I asked you to moderate your language."

"I beg your pardon; but it's a habit—of some standing."

"Then if that is the case, probably the time is come that it should die. Please let it die—if for this occasion only. Must I repeat my invitation, and press you to enter, in face of the eagerness to effect an entrance which it seems that you have already shown?"

Mr. Ballingall continued to exhibit signs of indecision.

"This isn't a trap, or anything of that kind?"

"I am afraid I hardly understand you. What do you mean by a trap?"

"Well"—his lips were distorted by what was possibly meant for a grin—"it doesn't want much understanding, when you come to think of it."

"We ask you to come in. If you accept our invitation you will of course be at liberty to go again whenever you please. We certainly shall make no effort to detain you, for any cause whatever."

"Well, if that's the case, it's a queer start, by " He seemed about to utter his accustomed imprecation; then, catching her eyes, refrained, adding, in a different tone, "I think I will."

He did, passing first one leg over the sill, and then the other. When the whole of. his body was in the room he removed his hat, the action effecting a distinct improvement in his appearance. The departure of the disreputable billycock disclosed the fact that his head was not by any means ill-shaped. One perceived that this had once been an intelligent man, whose intelligence was very far from being altogether a thing of the past. More, it suggested the probability of his having been good-looking. Nor did it need a keen observer to suspect that if he was shaven and shorn, combed and groomed, and his rags were exchanged for decent raiment, that there was still enough of manliness about him to render him sufficiently presentable. He was not yet of the hopelessly submerged; although just then he could scarcely have appeared to greater disadvantage. His clothes were the scourings of the ragman's bag—ill-fitting, torn, muddy. His boots were odd ones, whose gaping apertures revealed the sockless feet within. In his whole bearing there was that indefinable, furtive something which is the hall-mark of the wretch who hopes for nothing but an opportunity to snatch the wherewithal to stay the cravings of his belly, and who sees an enemy even in the creature who flings to him a careless dole. This atmosphere which was about him, of the outcast and the pariah, was heightened by the obvious fact that, at that very moment, he was hungry, hideously hungry. His eyes, now that they were more clearly seen, were wolfish. In their haste to begin their treasure—hunting they had not even waited to take away the tea-things. The man's glances were fastened on the fragments of food which were on the table, as if it was only by an effort of will that he was able to keep himself from pouncing on them like some famished animal.

Madge perceived the looks of longing.

"We are just going to have supper. You must join us. Then we can talk while we are eating. Ella, help me to get it ready. Sit down, Mr. Ballingall, I daresay you are tired—and perhaps you had better close the window. Ella and I shall not be long."

They made a curious trio, the three men, while the two girls made ready. Ballingall closed the window, with an air half sheepish, half defiant. Then placed himself upon a seat, in bolt upright fashion, as if doubtful of the chair's solidity. Jack took up a position in the centre of the hearthrug, so evidently at a loss for something appropriate to say as to make his incapacity almost pathetic—apparently the unusual character of the situation had tied his tongue into a double knot. Graham's attitude was more complex. The portion of the wainscot which he had undertaken to displace not having been entirely removed, resuming his unfinished task, he continued to wrench the boards from their fastenings as if intentionally oblivious of the new arrival's presence.

Nor was the meal which followed of a familiar type. The resources of the larder were not manifold, but all that it contained was placed upon the table. The *pièce de resistance* consisted of six boiled eggs.

"If you boil all those eggs," Ella declared, when Madge laid on them a predatory hand, there'll be nothing left in the house for breakfast."

"The man is famished," retorted Madge with some inconsequence. "What does breakfast matter to us if the man is starving." So the six were boiled. And he ate them all. Indeed he ate all there was to eat—devoured would have been the more appropriate word. For he attacked his food with a voracity which it was not nice to witness, bolting it with a complete disregard to rules which suggest the advisability of preliminary mastication.

It was not until his wolf—like appetite was, at least, somewhat appeased by the consumption of nearly all the food that was on the table, that Madge approached the subject which was uppermost in all their thoughts.

“As I was saying, Mr. Ballingall, Mr. Graham has told us of all that passed between you.

At the moment he had a piece of bread in One hand and some cheese in the other—all the cheese that was left. The satisfaction of his appetite seemed to have increased his ferocity. Cramming both morsels into his mouth at once, he turned on her with a sort of half-choked snarl.

“Then what right had he to do that?”

“It seems to me that he had a good deal of right.”

“How? Who’s he? A lawyer out of a job, who comes and offers me his services. I’m his client. As his client I give him my confidence. Looking at it from the professional point of view only, what right has he to pass my confidence on to any one?—any one! He’s been guilty of a dirty and disgraceful action, and he knows it. You know it, you do.” He snarled across the board at Graham. “If I were to report him to the Law Society they’d take him off the rolls.”

“I question it.”

Madge’s tone was dry.

“You may question it—but I know what I’m talking about. What use does he make of the confidence which he worms out of me?”

“I wormed nothing out of you.” The interruption was Graham’s. “Whatever you said to me was said spontaneously, without the slightest prompting on my part.”

“What difference does that make?—Then what use does he make of what I said spontaneously? He knows that I am a poor driven devil, charged with a crime which I never committed. I explain to him how it happened that that crime comes to be laid against me, how I’ve been told that there’s money waiting for me in a certain place, which is mine for the fetching, and how, when I went to fetch it, I was snapped for burglary. I’m found guilty of what I never did, and I get twelve months. In this country law and justice are two different things. What does my lawyer—my own lawyer, who pressed on me his services, mind!—do, while I’m in prison for what I never did? He takes advantage of my confidence, and without a word to me, or a hint of any sort, he goes and looks for my money—my money, mind!—on his own account—and for all I know he’s got it in his pocket now.”

“That he certainly has not.”

This was Madge.

“Then it isn’t his fault if he hasn’t. Can you think of anything dirtier? not to speak of more unprofessional? Why one thief wouldn’t behave to another thief like that—not if he was a touch above the carrion. Here have I, an innocent man, been rotting in gaol, think, think, thinking of what I’d do with the money when I did come out, and here was the man who ought to have been above suspicion, and whom I thought was above suspicion, plotting and planning all the time how he could rob me of what he very well knew was the only thing which could save me from the outer darkness of hell and of despair.”

Graham motioned Madge to silence.

“One moment, Miss Brodie. You must not suppose, Mr. Ballingall, that because I suffer you to make your sweeping charges against me without interruption, that I admit their truth, or the justice of the epithets which you permit yourself to apply to me. On the contrary, I assert that your statements are for the most part wholly unjustifiable, and that where they appear to have some measure of justification, they are easily capable of complete explanation. Whatever you may continue to say I shall decline to argue with you here. If you will come to my rooms I will give you every explanation you can possibly desire.”

“Yes, I daresay,—and take the earliest opportunity of handing me over to the first convenient copper. Unless I’m mistaken, that’s the kind of man you are.”

Madge caught the speaker by the sleeve of his ragged coat, with a glance at Graham, whose countenance had grown ominously black.

"If you will take my advice, Mr. Ballingall, since it is plain that you know nothing of the mind of man Mr. Graham really is, instead of continuing to talk in that extremely foolish fashion you will listen to what I have to say. The night before last we were the victims of an attempted burglary—"

"I did it—you know I did it. I give myself away—if there's any giving about it. You can whistle for a constable, and give me into charge right off; I'm willing. Perhaps it'll turn out to be the same bobby I handled before, and then he'll be happier than ever.

"I am sorry to learn that you were the burglar—very sorry. My friend, Miss Duncan, and I were alone in the house, a fact of which you were probably aware." That Mr. Ballingall might still be possessed of some remnants of saving grace was suggested by the fact that, at this point, he winced. "Other considerations aside, it was hardly a heroic action to break, at dead of night, into a lonely cottage, whose only inmates were a couple of unprotected girls."

"There was a revolver fired."

"As you say, there was a revolver fired—by me, at the ceiling. Does that tend to strengthen the evidence which goes to show that the deed, on your part, was a courageous one?"

"I never said that it was."

"You are perfectly conscious that we shall not whistle for a policeman, and that we shall not give you into charge. Is it necessary for you to talk as if you thought we should?"

"Am I to be robbed—"

"I fancy that the robbing has not been all upon one side." Mr. Ballingall did not look happier. "The burglar left behind him a scrap of paper—"

"Oh, I did, did I? I wondered where it was."

"At present it is in the possession of the police."

"The devil!"

"You need not be alarmed." Mr. Ballingall had suddenly risen, as if disturbed by some reflection. "That was before we knew by whom we had been favoured. Now that we do know, the paper will not be used in evidence against you—nor the police either. Before handing over that scrap of paper we took a copy of the writing which was on it. That writing was a key to two secret hiding—places which are contained within this house."

"How do you know that?"

"By exercising a little of my elementary common sense. Observe, Mr. Ballingall." Rising from her seat, she crossed to the door. "On that paper which you were so good as to leave behind you it was written, 'Right'—I stand on the right of the door. 'Straight across'—I walk straight across the room. 'Three'—I measure three feet horizontally. 'Four'—and four feet perpendicularly. 'Up'—I push the panel up; it opens, and I find that there is something within. That, Mr. Ballingall, is how I know the paper was a guide to two secret hiding-places—by discovering the first. What is the matter with the man? Has he gone mad?"

The question, which was asked with a sudden and striking change of tone, was induced by the singularity of Mr. Ballingall's demeanour. He had started when Madge took up her position at the door, eyeing her following evolutions speechlessly, breathlessly, as if spellbound. Her slightest movement seemed to possess for him some curious fascination. As she proceeded, his agitation increased; every nerve seemed strained so that he might not lose the smallest detail of all that happened, until when, with dramatic gestures, she imitated the action of striking the

panel, raising it, and taking out something which was contained within, he broke into cry after cry.

"My God!—my God!—my God!" he repeated, over and over again.

Covering his face with his hands, as if he strove to guard his eyes against some terrible vision, he crouched in a sort of heap on the floor.

CHAPTER XV

THE COMPANION OF HIS SOLITUDE

When he looked up, it was timidly, doubtfully, as if fearful of what he might see. He glanced about him anxiously from side to side, as if in search of something or some one.

"Tom!—Tom!" he said, speaking it was difficult to say to whom.

He paused, as if for an answer. When none came, he drew himself upright gradually, inch by inch. They noticed how his lips were twitching, and how the whole of his body trembled. He passed his hand over his eyes, as a man might who is waking from a dream. Then he stretched it out in front of him, palm upwards, with a something of supplication in the action which lent pathos to the words he uttered—words which in themselves were more than sufficiently bizarre.

"Do any of you believe in ghosts?—in disembodied spirits assuming a corporeal shape?—in the dead returning from their graves? Or is a man who thinks he sees a ghost, who knows he sees a ghost, who knows that a ghost is a continual attendant of his waking and of his sleeping hours alike—must such a man be in labour with some horrible delusion of his senses? Is his brain of necessity unhinged? Must he of a certainty be mad?"

Not only was such an interrogation in itself remarkable, but more especially was it so as coming from such a figure as Ballingall presented. His rags and dirt were in strange contrast with his language. His words, chosen as it seemed with a nice precision, came from his lips with all the signs of practiced ease. His manner, even his voice, assumed a touch of refinement which before it lacked. In him was displayed the spectacle of a man of talent and of parts encased in all the outward semblance of a creature of the kennel.

Madge, to whom the inquiry seemed to be more particularly addressed, replied to it with another.

"Why do you ask us such a question?"

About the man's earnestness, as he responded, there could be no doubt. The muscles of his face twitched as with St. Vitus' Dance; beads of sweat stood upon his brow; the intensity of his desire to give adequate expression to his thoughts seemed to hamper his powers of utterance.

"Because I want some one to help me—some one, God or man. Because, during the last year and more I have endured a continual agony to which I doubt if the pains of hell can be compared. Because things with me have come to such a pitch that it is only at times I know if I am dead or living, asleep or waking, mad or sane, myself or another."

He pointed to Graham.

"He has told you how it was with me afore-time; how I was haunted—driven by a ghost to gaol. When I was in gaol it was worse a thousandfold—I was haunted, always, day and night. The ghost of my old friend—the best friend man ever had—whom in so many ways I had so blackly and often wronged, was with me, continually, in my cell. Oh for some sign by which I could know that my sins have been forgiven me!—by which I could learn that by suffering I could atone for the evil I have done! Some sign, O Lord, some sign!"

He threw his hands above his head in a paroxysm of passion. As has been said of more than one great tragic actor, in his voice there were tears. As, indeed, there were in the eyes of at least one of those who heard. His manner, when he proceeded, was a little calmer—which very fact seemed to italicise the strangeness of his tale.

"The first day I spent in prison I was half beside myself with rage. I had done things for which I had merited punishment, even of man, and now that punishment had come, it was for something I had not done. The irony, as well as the injustice of it, made me nearly wild. I had my first taste of the crank—which is as miserable, as futile, and as irritating a mode of torture as was ever spewed out of a flesh and blood crank's unhealthy stomach; and I was having, what they called there, dinner, when the cell door opened, and—Tom Ossington came in. It was just after noon, in the broad day. He came right in front of me, and, leaning on his stick, he stood and watched me. I had not been thinking of him, and, a moment before, had been hot with fury, ready to dare or do anything; but, at . the sight of him, the strength went out of me. My bones might have been made of jelly, they seemed so little able to support my body. There was nothing about him which was in the least suggestive of anything unusual. He was dressed in a short coat and felt hat, which were just like the coat and hats which he always had worn; and he had in his hand the identical stick which I had seen him carry perhaps a thousand times. If it was a ghost, then there are ghosts of clothes as well as of men. If it was an optical delusion, then there are more things in optics than are dreamt of in our philosophy. If it was an hallucination born of a disordered mind, then it is possible to become lunatic without being conscious of any preliminary sappings of the brain; and it is indeed but an invisible border line which divides the madmen from the sane.

" 'Well, Charlie,' he said, in the quiet tones which I had known so well, 'so it's come to this. You made a bit of a mistake in coming when you did to fetch away that fortune of yours.'

" 'It seems,' I said, 'as if I had.'

"He laughed—that gentle laugh of his which had always seemed to me to be so full of enjoyment.

" 'Never mind, Charlie, you come another time. The fortune won't run away while you're in here.'

"With that, he turned and limped out of the cell; the door seeming to open before him at a touch of his hand, and shutting behind him as noiselessly as it had opened. It was only after he had gone that I realised what it was that I had seen. In an instant I was in a muck of sweat. While I was sitting on my stool, more dead than alive, the door opened again, this time with clatter and noise enough, and a warder appeared. He glared at me in a fashion which meant volumes.

" 'Is that you talking in here? You'd better take care, my lad, or you'll make a bad beginning.'

"He banged the door behind him—and he went."

Ballingall paused, to wipe his brow with the back of his hand; and he sighed.

"I made a bad beginning, and, from the warder's point of view, I went from. bad to worse. I do not know if the man I had injured has been suffered to torture me before my time, or if where he is, his nature has changed, and he seeks, in the grave, the vengeance he never sought in life. If so, he has his fill of it—he surely has had his fill of it!—already. It was through him that I was there, and now that I was there he made my sojourn in the prison worse than it need have been. Much worse, God knows.

"That first visitation of his was followed by others. Twice, thrice, sometimes four times a day, he would come to me when I was in my cell, and speak to me, and compel me to answer him; and my voice would be heard without. It became quite a custom for the warder on duty to stand

outside my cell, often in the middle of the night, and pounce on me as soon as Tom had gone. The instant Tom went, the warder would come in. Never once did an officer enter while he was actually with me, but, almost invariably, his departure was the signal for the warder to put in his appearance. I don't know how it was, or why it was, but so it was. I would be accused of carrying on a conversation with myself reported, and punished. As a matter of fact, I was in continual hot water—because of Tom. Not a single week passed from that in which I entered the prison, to that in which I left it, during which I did not undergo punishment of some sort or the other, because of Toni. As a result, all my marks were bad marks. When I left the gaol, so far from receiving the miserable pittance which good-conduct prisoners are supposed to earn, I was penniless; I had not even the wherewithal with which to buy myself a crust of bed.

"A more dreadful form of torture Tom could hardly have invented. A man need not necessarily suffer although he is in gaol. But I suffered. Always I was in the bad books of the officers. They regarded me as an incorrigible bad-conduct man—which, from their point of view, I was. All sorts of ignominy was heaped on me. Every form of punishment I could be made to undergo I had to undergo. I never earned my stripe, nor the right of having a coir mattress with which to cover the bare board on which I was supposed to sleep. I was nearly starved, owing to the perpetually recurring bread and water. And the horrors I endured, the devils which beset me, in that unspeakable dark cell! To me, gaol was a long-drawn-out and ever-increasing agony, from the first moment to the last.

"God knows it was!"

The speaker paused. He stood, his fists clenched, staring vacantly in front of him, as if he saw there, in a mist, the crowding spectres of the past. There seemed to come a break in his voice as he continued. He spoke with greater hesitation.

"Some three months before my sentence was completed, Tom changed his tactics. While I was sleeping—such sleep!—on the bare board which served me as a bed, I'd have a vision. It was like a vision—like a vision, and yet—it was as if I was awake. It seemed as if Tom came to me, and put his arm into mine, and led me out of gaol, and brought me here to Clover Cottage. He'd stand at the gate and say 'Charlie, this is Clover Cottage,' and I'd answer, 'I know it is.' Then he'd laugh—in some way that laugh of his seemed to cut me like a knife. And he'd lead me down the pathway and into the house, to this very room. Though"—Ballingall looked about him doubtfully—"it wasn't furnished as it is now. It was like it used to be. And he'd go and stand by the door, as you did"—this was to Madge—"and he'd say, 'Now, Charlie, pay particular attention to what I am about to do. I'm going to show you how to get that fortune of yours—which you came for once before and went away without. Now observe.'

"Then he'd walk straight across the room, as you did," again to Madge—"and he'd turn to me and say, 'Notice exactly what I'm doing!' Then he'd take a foot rule from his pocket, and he'd measure three feet from where he stood along the floor. And he'd hold up the rule, and say, 'You see—three feet.' Then he'd measure four feet from the floor, and hold out the rule again and say, 'You see, four feet.' Then he'd put his hand against the panel and move it upwards, and it would slide open—and there was an open space within. He'd put his hand into the open space, and take something out; it looked to me like a sheet of paper. And he'd say, 'This is what will give you that fortune of yours—when you find it. Only you'll have to find it first. Be sure you find it, Charlie.'

"And he'd laugh—and, though it was the gentle laugh of his which I had known so well of old, there was something about it which seemed to mock me, and cut me like a whip and make me

quiver. He'd take my arm again, and lead me from the house and back to the gaol, and I'd wake to find myself lying on the bare board, alone in the dark cell, crying like a child.

"In the morning, perhaps at dinner-time, he'd come into the cell in the usual way, and ask me:

" 'Charlie, do you remember last night?' 'Yes, Tom,' I'd reply, 'I do.' And then he'd go on:

" 'Mind you don't forget. It's most important, Charlie, that you shouldn't forget. I'll tell you what you must remember. Take this and write it down.'

"And he'd give me something, my Bible, or my prayer-book, or even the card of rules which was hung against the wall, and a piece of pencil—though where he got that from I never knew, and he'd say, 'Now write what I dictate.'

"And I did, just as you saw it on the paper which I left behind; the first line, 'Tom Ossington's Ghost'—he always made me write that; it was the only allusion he ever made to there being anything unusual about his presence there; and the second line, 'right—straight across—three—four—up.' When I'd written it he'd say:

" 'Charlie, mind you take the greatest care of that; don't let it go out of your possession for a moment. It's the guide to that fortune of yours.

"Then he'd go. And the moment he had gone the warder would come bursting in, and catch me with the pencil, and the Bible, or whatever it was, in my hand, with the writing on the flyleaf. And he'd begin to gird at me.

" 'So you're at it again, are you? And you've got a pencil, have you? and been writing in your Bible? You're a pretty sort, upon my word you are. I tell you what it is, my lad, you'll get yourself into serious trouble before you've done.'

"And he'd take the pencil away with him, and the Bible, and the writing; and I'd be reported again, and punished with the utmost severity which was within the compass of the Governor's power.

Ballingall stopped again. A convulsive fit of trembling seemed to go all over him.

"Towards the end, the vision took another form. Tom would bring me to the house—only I think, not to this room, but to another—and he would do something—he would do something. I saw quite clearly what it was he did, and understood it well, but, so soon as I was out of the house, the recollection of what he had done became blurred as by a mist. I could not remember at all. I'd wake in my cell in an agony to think that all that Tom had shown me should have slipped my memory. In the morning he'd come and ask:

" 'Charlie, you remember what we did last night?'

" 'No, Tom, I don't. I've tried to think, but I can't. It's all forgotten.'

"He'd laugh—his laugh seeming to mock me more than ever.

" 'Never mind, Charlie, I'll tell you all about it. You write down what I say.'

"And I wrote it down—the last line which was on the scrap of paper. Though I never knew what it meant—never! never! I've searched my brains many times to think; and been punished for writing it again and again.

"At last 1 was released. At last—my God, at last!"

His whole frame quivered. He drew himself upright, as if endeavouring to bear himself as became a man.

"I was treated, when going out, according to my deserts. I had earned no favour, and I received none. The Governor reprimanded me, by way of a God-speed; told me that my conduct, while in prison, had been very bad, and warned me that it would go ill with me if I returned. I went out in the rags in which I had entered, without a penny in my pocket—hungry at the moment of release. I have not tasted bite or sup from the time that I came out of gaol until tonight.

"In the afternoon I came round to Clover Cottage. The first thing I saw was him." He pointed to Graham. "He was afraid of me, and I was afraid of him—that is the truth. Otherwise I should have gone up to him and asked him for at least a shilling, because directly I caught sight of him I knew what he was after, and that I was going to be tricked and robbed again. While I was trying to summon up courage enough to beg of the man whom I knew had played me false, I saw some one else, and I ran away.

"I meant to get a bed in the casual ward of the Wandsworth Workhouse. But Tom came to me as I was going there, and told me not to be so silly, but to come and get the fortune which was waiting for me at Clover Cottage. So I came. But I never got the fortune.

"And ever since I've been growing hungrier and hungrier, until I've grown beside myself with hunger—because Tom stopped me when I was going to the workhouse again last night, and bade me not to be so silly, though I don't know why I should have been silly in seeking for shelter and for food. And not a couple of hours ago he came to me while I was trying to find a hole on the Common in which to sleep, and packed me off once more to fetch away my fortune. But I haven't found it yet—not yet, not yet. Though"—he stretched out his arms on either side of him, and on his face there came a strange look of what seemed exultation—"I know it's near."

In the pause which followed, Ella raised her hand.

"Listen," she exclaimed; "who's that? There's some one at the garden gate."

There did seem some one at the garden gate, some one who opened and shut it with a bang. They heard footsteps on the tiles which led to the front door. While they waited, listening for a knock, another sound was heard.

"Hark," cried Ella. "There's some one fumbling with a latchkey at the door, trying to open it. Whoever can it be—at this hour of the night? There must be some mistake."

"I think," said Madge, in her eyes there was a very odd expression, "it is possible there is no mistake—this time."