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***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ASHIEL MYSTERY *****

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THE ASHIEL MYSTERY
A DETECTIVE STORY

BY MRS. CHARLES BRYCE

"It is the difficulty of the Police Romance, that the reader is always a man of such vastly greater ingenuity than the writer."

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

CHAPTER I

When Sir Arthur Byrne fell ill, after three summers at his post in the little consulate that overlooked the lonely waters of the Black Sea, he applied for sick leave. Having obtained it, he hurried home to scatter guineas in Harley Street; for he felt all the uneasy doubts as to his future which a strong man who has never in his life known what it is to have a headache is apt to experience at the first symptom that all is not well. Outwardly, he pretended to make light of the matter.

"Drains, that's what it is," he would say to some of the passengers to whom he confided the altered state of his health on board the boat which carried him to Constantinople. "As soon as I get back to a civilized sewage system I shall be myself again. These Eastern towns are all right for Orientals; and what is your Muscovite but an Oriental, in all essentials of hygiene? But they play the deuce with a European who has grown up in a country where people still indulge in a sense of smell."

And if anyone ventured to sympathize with him, or to express regret at his illness, he would snub him fiercely. But for all that he felt convinced, in his own mind, that he had been attacked by some fatal disease. He became melancholy and depressed; and, if he did not spend his days in drawing up his last will and testament, it was because such a proceeding--in view of the state of his banking account--would have partaken of the nature of a farce. Having a sense of humour, he was little disposed, just then, to any action whose comic side he could not conveniently ignore.

When he arrived in London, however, he was relieved to find that the specialists whom he consulted, while they mostly gave him his money's worth of polite interest, did not display any anxiety as to his condition. One of them, indeed, went so far as to mention a long name, and to suggest that an operation for appendicitis would be likely to do no harm; but, on being cross-examined, confessed that he saw no reason to suspect anything wrong with Sir Arthur's appendix; so that the young man left the consulting-room in some indignation.

He remembered, as soon as the door had closed behind him, that he had

forgotten to ask the meaning of the long name; and, being reluctant to set eyes again on the doctor who had mystified him with it, went to another and demanded to know what such a term might signify.

"Is--is it--dangerous?" he stammered, trying in vain to appear indifferent.

Sir Ronald Tompkins, F.R.C.S., etc. etc., let slip a smile; and then, remembering his reputation, changed it to a look of grave sympathy.

"No," he murmured, "no, no. There is no danger. I should say, no immediate danger. Still you did right, quite right, in coming to me. Taken in time, and in the proper way, this delicacy of yours will, I have no hesitation in saying, give way to treatment. I assure you, my dear Sir Arthur, that I have cured many worse cases than yours. I will write you out a little prescription. Just a little pill, perfectly pleasant to the taste, which you must swallow when you feel this alarming depression and lack of appetite of which you complain; and I am confident that we shall soon notice an improvement. Above all, my dear Sir, no worry; no anxiety. Lead a quiet, open-air life; play golf; avoid bathing in cold water; avoid soup, potatoes, puddings and alcohol; and come and see me again this day fortnight. Thank you, yes, two guineas. _Good_-bye."

He pressed Sir Arthur's hand, and shepherded him out of the room.

His patient departed, impressed, soothed and comforted.

After the two weeks had passed, and feeling decidedly better, he returned.

Sir Ronald on this occasion was absolutely cheerful. He expressed himself astonished at the improvement, and enthusiastic on the subject of the excellence of his own advice. He then broke to Sir Arthur the fact that he was about to take his annual holiday. He was starting for Norway the next day, and should not be back for six weeks.

"But what shall I do while you are away?" cried his patient, aghast.

"You have advanced beyond my utmost expectations," replied the doctor, "and the best thing for you now will be to go out to Vichy, and take a course of the waters there. I should have recommended this in any case. My intended departure makes no difference. Let me earnestly advise you to start for France to-morrow."

Sir Arthur had by this time developed a blind faith in Sir Ronald Tompkins and did not dream of ignoring his suggestion. He threw over all the engagements he had made since arriving in England; packed his trunks once more; and, if he did not actually leave the country until two or three days later, it was only because he was not able to get a sleeping berth on the night express at such short notice.

The end of the week saw him installed at Vichy, the most assiduous and conscientious of all the water drinkers assembled there.

It was on the veranda of his hotel that he made the acquaintance of Mrs. Meredith.

She was twenty-five, rich, beautiful and a widow, her husband having been accidentally killed within a few months of their marriage. After a year or so of mourning she had recovered her spirits, and led a gay life in English society, where she was very much in request.

Sir Arthur had seen few attractive women of late, the ladies of Baku being inclined to run to fat and diamonds, and he thought Lena Meredith the most lovely and the most wonderful creature that ever stepped out of a fairy tale.

From the very moment he set eyes on her he was her devoted slave, and after the first few days a more constant attendant than any shadow--for shadows at best are mere fair-weather comrades. He seldom saw the lady alone, for she had with her a small child, not yet a year old, of which she was, as it seemed to Sir Arthur, inordinately fond; and whether she were sitting under the trees in the garden of the hotel, or driving slowly along the dusty roads--as was her habit each afternoon--the baby and its nurse were always with her, and by their presence put an effective check to the personalities in which he was longing to indulge. It would have taken more than a baby to discourage Sir Arthur, however: he cheerfully included the little girl in his attentions; and, as time went on, became known to the other invalids in the place by the nickname of "the Nursemaid."

Mrs. Meredith took his homage as a matter of course. She was used to admiration, though she was not one of those women to whom it is indispensable. She considered it one of the luxuries of life, and held that it is more becoming than diamonds and a better protection against the weather than the most expensive furs. At first she looked upon the obviously stricken state of Sir Arthur with amusement, combined with a good deal of gratification that some one should have arisen to entertain her in this dull health resort; but gradually, as the weeks passed, her point of view underwent a change. Whether it was the boredom of the cure, or whether she was touched by the unselfish devotion of her admirer, or whether it was due merely to the accident that Sir Arthur was an uncommonly good-looking young man and so little conscious of the fact, from one cause or another she began to feel for him a friendliness which grew quickly more pronounced; so that at the end of a month, when he found her, for the first time walking alone by the lake, and proposed to her inside the first two minutes of their encounter, she accepted him almost as promptly, and with very nearly as much enthusiasm.

"I want to talk to you about the child, little Juliet," she said, a day or two later. "Or rather, though I want to talk about her, perhaps I had better not, for I can tell you almost nothing that concerns her."

"My dear," said Sir Arthur, "you needn't tell me anything, if you don't like."

"But that's just the tiresome part," she returned, "I should like you to know everything, and yet I must not let you know. She is not mine, of course, but beyond that her parentage must remain a secret, even from you. Yet this I may say: she is the child of a friend of mine, and there is no scandal attached to her birth, but I have taken all responsibility as to her future. Are you, Arthur, also prepared to adopt her?"

"Darling, I will adopt dozens of them, if you like," said her infatuated betrothed. "Juliet is a little dear, and I am very glad we shall always have her."

In England, the news of Lena Meredith's engagement caused a flutter of excitement and disappointment. It had been hoped that she would make a great match, and she received many letters from members of her family and friends, pointing out the deplorable manner in which she was throwing herself away on an impecunious young baronet who occupied an obscure position in the Consular Service. She was begged to remember that the Duke of Datchet had seemed distinctly smitten when he was introduced to her at the end of the last season; and told that if she would not consider her own interests it was unnecessary that she should forget those of her younger unmarried sisters.

At shooting lodges in the North, and in country houses in the South, young men were observed to receive the tidings with pained surprise. More than one of them had given Mrs. Meredith credit for better taste when it came to choosing a second husband; more than one of them had felt, indeed, that she was the only woman in the world with an eye discerning enough to appreciate his own valuable qualities at their true worth. Could the fact be that she had overlooked those rare gifts? For a week or so depression sat in many a heart unaccustomed to its presence; and young ladies, in search of a husband, found, here and there, that one turned to them whom they had all but given up as hopelessly indifferent to their charms.

Unconcerned by the lack of enthusiasm aroused by her decision, Lena Meredith married Sir Arthur Byrne, and in the course of a few months departed with him to his post on the Black Sea; where the baby Juliet and her nurse formed an important part of the consular household.

The years passed happily. Sir Arthur was moved and promoted from one little port to another a trifle more frequented by the ships of his country, and after a year or so to yet another still larger; so that, while nothing was too good for Juliet in the eyes of her adopted mother, and to a lesser extent in those of her father, it happened that she knew remarkably little of her own land, though few girls were more familiar with those of other nations. Nor were their wanderings confined to Europe: Africa saw them, and the southern continent of America; and it was in that far country that the happy days came to an end, for poor Lady Byrne caught cold one bitter Argentine day, and died of pneumonia before the week was out.

Sir Arthur was heart-broken. He packed Juliet off to a convent school near Buenos Ayres, and shut himself up in his consulate, refusing to meet

those who would have offered their sympathy, and going from his room to his office, and back again, like a man in a dream.

Not for more than a year did Juliet see again the only friend she had now left in the world; and it was then she heard for the first time that he was not really her father, and that the woman she had called "Mother" had had no right to that name. She was fifteen years old when this blow fell on her; and she had not yet reached her sixteenth birthday when Sir Arthur was transferred back to Europe.

"Your home must always be with me, Juliet," he had said, when he broke to her his ignorance of her origin. "I have only you left now."

But though he was kind, and even affectionate to her, he showed no real anxiety for her society. She was sent to a school in Switzerland as soon as they landed in Europe; and, while she used to fancy that at the beginning of the holidays he was glad to see her return, she was much more firmly convinced that at the end of them he was at least equally pleased to see her depart.

She was nineteen before he realized that she could not be kept at school for ever; and when he considered the situation, and saw himself, a man scarcely over forty, saddled with a grown-up girl, who was neither his own daughter nor that of the woman he had loved, and to whom he had sworn to care for the child as if she were indeed his own, it must be admitted that his heart failed him. It was not that he had any aversion to Juliet herself. He had been fond of the child, and he liked the girl. It was the awkwardness of his position that filled him with a kind of despair.

"If only somebody would marry her!" he thought, as he sat opposite to her at the dinner-table, on the night that she returned for the last time from school.

The thought cheered him. Juliet, he noticed for the first time, had become singularly pretty. He engaged a severe Frenchwoman of mature age as chaperon, and made spasmodic attempts to take his adopted daughter into such society as the Belgian port, where he was consul at this time, could afford.

It was not a large society; nor did eligible young men figure in it in any quantity. Those there were, were foreigners, to whom the question of a _dot_ must be satisfactorily solved before the idea of matrimony would so much as occur to them.

Juliet had no money. Lady Byrne had left her fortune to her husband, and rash speculations on his part had reduced it to a meagre amount, which he felt no inclination to part with. Two or three years went by, and she received no proposals. Sir Arthur's hopes of seeing her provided for grew faint, and he could imagine no way out of his difficulties. He himself spent his leave in England, but he never took the girl with him on those holidays. He had no wish to be called on to explain her presence to such of his friends as might not remember his wife's whim; and, though she passed as his daughter abroad, she could not do that at home.

Juliet, for her part, was not very well content. She could hardly avoid knowing that she was looked on as an incubus, and she saw that her father, as she called him, dreaded to be questioned as to their relationship. She lived a simple life; rode and played tennis with young Belgians of her own age; read, worked, went to such dances and entertainments as were given in the little town, and did not, on the whole, waste much time puzzling over the mystery that surrounded her childhood. But when her friends asked her why she never went to England with Sir Arthur, she did not know what answer to make, and worried herself in secret about it.

Why did he not take her? Because he was ashamed of her? But why was he ashamed? Her mother--she always thought of Lady Byrne by that name--had said she was the daughter of a friend of hers. So that she must at least be the child of people of good family. Was not that enough?

She was already twenty-three when Sir Arthur married again. The lady was an American: Mrs. Clarency Butcher, a good-looking widow of about thirty-five, with three little girls, of whom the eldest was fifteen. She had not the enormous wealth which is often one of her countrywomen's most pleasing attributes, but she was moderately well off and came of a good Colonial family. Having lived for several years in England, she had grown to prefer the King's English to the President's, and had dropped, almost completely, the accent of her native country. She was extremely well educated, and talked three other languages with equal correctness, her first husband having been attached to various European legations. Altogether, she was a charming and attractive woman, and there were many who envied Sir Arthur for the second time in his life.

It was not, perhaps, her fault that she did not take very kindly to Juliet. The girl resented the place once occupied by her dead mother being filled by any newcomer; and was not, it is to be feared, at sufficient pains to hide her feelings on the point. And the second Lady Byrne was hardly to be blamed if she remembered that in a few years she would have three daughters of her own to take out, and felt that a fourth was almost too much of a good thing.

Besides, there was no getting over the fact that she was no relation whatever, and was on the other hand a considerable drain on the family resources, all of which Lady Byrne felt entirely equal to disbursing alone and unassisted. Finally, her presence led to disagreements between Sir Arthur and his wife.

The day came on which Lady Byrne could not resist drawing Juliet's attention to her unfortunate circumstances. In a heated moment, induced by the girl's refusal to meet her half-way when she was conscious of having made an unusual effort to be friendly, she pointed out to Juliet that it would be more becoming in her to show some gratitude to people on whose charity she was living, and on whom she had absolutely no claim of blood at all.

The interview ended by Juliet flying to Sir Arthur, and begging, while

she wept on his shoulder, to be allowed to go away and work for her living; though where and how she proposed to do this she did not specify.

Sir Arthur had a bad quarter of an hour. His conscience, the knowledge of the extent to which he shared his second wife's feelings, the remembrance of the vows he had made on the subject to his first wife, these and the old, if not very strong, affection he had for Juliet, combined to stir in him feelings of compunction which showed themselves in an outburst of irritability. He scolded Juliet; he blamed his wife.

"Why," he asked them both, "can two women not live in the same house without quarrelling? Is it impossible for a wretched man ever to have a moment's peace?"

In the end, he worked himself into such a passion that Lady Byrne and Juliet were driven to a reconciliation, and found themselves defending each other against his reproaches.

After this they got on better together.

CHAPTER II

One hot summer day, a few months after the marriage, Juliet, returning to the consulate after a morning spent in very active exercise upon a tennis court, was met on the doorstep by Dora, the youngest of the Clarency Butchers, who was awaiting her approach in a high state of excitement.

"Hurry up, Juliet," she cried, as soon as she could make herself heard. "You'll never guess what there is for you. Something you don't often get!"

"What is it?" said Juliet, coming up the steps.

"Guess!"

"A present?"

"No; at least I suppose not; but there may be one inside."

"Inside? Oh, then it's a parcel?" asked Juliet good-humouredly.

She felt a mild curiosity, tempered by the knowledge that many things provided a thrill for the ten-year-old Dora, which she, from the advanced age of twenty-three, could not look upon as particularly exciting.

"No, not a parcel," cried Dora, dancing round her. "It's a letter. There now!"

"Then why do you say it's something I don't often get?" asked Juliet

suspiciously; "I often get letters. It's an invitation to the Gertignes' dance, I expect."

"No, no, it isn't. It's a letter from England. You don't often get one from there, now, do you? You never did before since we've been here. I always examine your letters, you know," said Dora, "to see if they look as if they came from young men. So does Margaret. We think it's time you got engaged."

Margaret was the next sister.

"It's very good of you to take such an interest in my fate," Juliet replied, as she pulled off her gloves and went to the side-table for the letter. As a matter of fact she was a good deal excited now; for what the child said was true enough. She might even have gone further, and said that she had never had a letter from England, except while Sir Arthur was there on leave.

It was a large envelope, addressed in a clerk's handwriting, and she came to the conclusion, as she tore it open, that it must be an advertisement from some shop.

"DEAR MADAM,--We shall esteem it a favour if you can make it convenient to call upon us one day next week, upon a matter of business connected with a member of your family. It is impossible to give you further details in a letter; but if you will grant us the interview we venture to ask, we may go so far as to say that there appears to us to be a reasonable probability of the result being of advantage to yourself. Trusting that you will let us have an immediate reply, in which you will kindly name the day and hour when we may expect to see you.--We are, yours faithfully,

"FINDLAY & INGE, _Solicitors_."

The address was a street in Holborn.

Juliet read the letter through, and straightway read it through again, with a beating heart. What did it mean? Was it possible she was going to find her own family at last?

She was recalled to the present by the voice of Dora, whom she now perceived to be reading the letter over her shoulder with unblushing interest.

"Say," said Dora, "isn't it exciting? 'Something to your advantage!' Just what they put in the agony column when they leave you a fortune. I bet your long-lost uncle in the West has kicked the bucket, and left you all his ill-gotten gains. Mark my words. You'll come back from England a lovely heiress. I do wish the others would come in. There's no one in the house, except Sir Arthur."

"Where is he?" said Juliet, putting the sheet of paper back into the

envelope and slipping it under her waistband. "You know, Dora, it's not at all a nice thing to read other people's letters. I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself. I'm surprised at you."

"I shouldn't have read it if you'd been quicker about telling me what was in it," retorted Dora. "It's not at all a nice thing to put temptation in the way of a little girl like me. Do you suppose I'm made of cast iron?"

She departed with an injured air, and Juliet went to look for the consul.

"What is it?" he asked, as she put the envelope into his hand. "A letter you want me to read? Not a proposal, eh?" He smiled at her as he unfolded the large sheet of office paper.

"Hullo, what's this?"

He read it through carefully.

"Why, Juliet," he said, when he had finished, "this is very interesting, isn't it? It looks as if you were going to find out something about yourself, doesn't it? After all these years! Well, well."

"You think I must go, then," she said a little doubtfully.

"Go? Of course I should go, if I were you. Why not?"

"You don't think it is a hoax?"

"No, no; I see no reason to suppose such a thing. I know the firm of Findlay & Ince quite well by name and reputation."

"Oh, I hope they will tell me who I am!" cried Juliet. "Have you no idea at all, father?"

"No, my dear, you know I have not. Besides, I promised Lena I would never ask. You are the child of a friend of hers. That is all I know. I think she scarcely realized how hard it would be for you not to know more when you grew up. I often think that if she had lived she would have told you before now."

"If you promised her not to ask, I won't ask either," said Juliet loyally. "But I hope they'll tell me. It will be different, won't it, if they tell me without my asking?"

"I think you might ask," said Sir Arthur. "It is absurd that you should be bound by a promise that I made. And you may be sure of one thing. Your asking, or your not asking, won't make any odds to Findlay & Ince. If they mean to tell you, they will; and, if they don't, you're not likely to get it out of them."

"And when shall I go?" cried Juliet. "They say they want me to answer immediately, you know."

"Oh well, I don't know. In a few days. You will hardly be ready to start to-morrow, will you?"

"I could be ready, easily," said Juliet.

"You're in a great hurry to get away from us," said Sir Arthur, with a rather uneasy laugh.

"Not from you." Juliet put her arm through his. "I could never find another father half as nice as the one I've got. But you could do very well without so many daughters, you know." She smiled at him mockingly. "You're like the old woman who lived in a shoe. You ought to set up a school for young ladies."

"I don't believe I shall be able to get on without my eldest daughter," he replied, half-serious. "Still I think it would be better for you if your real parents have decided to own up to you. At all events, if they do not turn out desirable, I shall still be here, I hope; so I don't see how you can lose anything by taking this chance of finding out what you can about them."

At this point Lady Byrne came into the room, and the news had to be retold for her benefit; the letter was produced again, and she joined heartily in the excitement it had caused.

"You had better start on Monday," she said to Juliet. "That will give you two days to pack, and to write to an hotel for rooms. Are you going to take her, Arthur?" she added, turning to her husband.

"I would, like a shot," he replied, "but I can't possibly get away next week. I've got a lot of work on hand just now. I suppose, my dear," he suggested doubtfully, "that you wouldn't be able to run over with her?"

Lady Byrne declared that it was impossible for her to do so: she had engagements, she said, for every day of the following week, which it was out of the question to break. Had Sir Arthur forgotten that they themselves were having large dinner-parties on Tuesday and Friday? What she would do without Juliet to help her in preparing for them, she did not know, but at least it was obvious that some one must be there to receive his guests. No, Juliet would have to go alone. She was really old enough to be trusted by herself for three days, and there was no need, that she could see, for her to be away longer.

"She can go on Monday, see the lawyers on Tuesday, and come back on Wednesday," said Lady Byrne. "The helplessness of young girls is the one thing I disapprove of in your European system of education. It is much better that they should learn to manage their own affairs; and Juliet is not such a ninny as you seem to think."

"I shall be perfectly all right by myself," Juliet protested.

Sir Arthur did not like it.

"Supposing she is detained in London," he said.

"What should detain her," demanded his wife, "unless it is the discovery of her parents? And, if she finds them, I presume they will be capable of looking after her. In any case, she can write, or cable to us when she has seen the solicitors, and it is no use providing for contingencies that will probably never arise."

So at last it was decided. A letter was written and dispatched to Messrs. Findlay & Ince, saying that Miss Byrne would have pleasure in calling upon them at twelve o'clock on the following Tuesday; and Juliet busied herself in preparations for her journey.

On Monday morning she left Ostend, in the company of her maid.

It was a glorious August day. On shore the heat was intense, and it was a relief to get out of the stifling carriages of the crowded boat train, and to breathe the gentle air from the sea that met them as they crossed the gangway on to the steamer. Juliet enjoyed every moment of the journey; and would have been sorry when the crossing was over if she had not been so eager to set foot upon her native soil.

She leant upon the rail in the bows of the ship, watching the white cliffs grow taller and more distinct, and felt that now indeed she understood the emotions with which the heart of the exile is said to swell at the sight of his own land. She wondered if the sight of their country moved other passengers on the boat as she herself was moved, and made timid advances to a lady who was standing near her, in her need of some companion with whom to share her feeling.

"Have you been away from England a long time," she asked her.

"I have been abroad during a considerable period," replied the person she addressed, a stern-looking Scotswoman who did not appear anxious to enter into conversation.

From her severe demeanour Juliet imagined she might be a governess going for a holiday.

"You must be glad to be going home," she ventured.

"It's a far cry north to my home," said the Scotswoman, thawing slightly. "I'm fearing I will not be seeing it this summer. I'll be stopping in the south with some friends. The journey north is awful expensive."

"I'm sorry you aren't going home," Juliet sympathized, "but it will be nice to see the English faces at Dover, won't it? There may even be a Scotchman among the porters, you know, by some chance."

"No fear," said her neighbour gloomily. "They'll be local men, I have nae doubt. Though whether they are English or Scots," she added, "I'll have to give them saxpence instead of a fifty-centime bit; which is one

of the bonniest things you see on the Continent, to my way of thinking."

Juliet could get no enthusiasm out of her; and, look which way she might, she could not see any reflection on the faces of those around her of the emotions which stirred in her own breast. It had been a rough crossing, in spite of the cloudless sky and broiling sunshine, and most of the passengers had been laid low by the rolling of the vessel. They displayed anxiety enough to reach land; but, as far as she could see, what land it was they reached was a matter of indifference to them. No doubt, she thought, when the ship stopped and they felt better, they would be more disposed to a sentimentality like hers.

She found her maid--who had been one of the most sea-sick of those aboard--and assisted her ashore, put her into a carriage and ministered to her wants with the help of a tea-basket containing the delicious novelty of English bread and butter. In half an hour's time they were steaming hurriedly towards London. She was to lodge at a small hotel in Jermyn Street; and on that first evening even this seemed perfect to her. The badness of the cooking was a thing she refused to notice; and the astonishing hills and valleys of the bed caused in her no sensation beyond that of surprise. She was young, strong and healthy, and there was no reason that trifling discomforts of this kind should affect her enjoyment. To the shortcomings of the bed, indeed, she shut her eyes in more senses than one, for she was asleep three minutes after her head touched the pillow, nor did she wake till her maid roused her the next morning.

She got up at once and looked out of the window. It was a fine day again; over the roofs of the houses opposite she could see a blue streak of sky. Already the air had lost the touch of freshness which comes, even to London in August, during the first hours of the morning; and the heat in the low-ceilinged room on the third floor which Juliet occupied for the sake of economy, was oppressive in spite of the small sash windows being opened to their utmost capacity. But Juliet only laughed to herself with pleasure at the brilliancy of the day. She felt that the weather was playing up to the occasion, as became this important morning of her life. For that it was important she did not doubt. She was going to hear tremendous news that day; make wonderful discoveries about her birth; hear undreamt-of things. Of this she felt absolutely convinced, and it would not have astonished her to find herself claimed as daughter by any of the reigning families of Europe. She was prepared for anything, or so she said to herself, however astounding; and, that being so, she was excited in proportion. Anyone could have told her that, by this attitude of mind towards the future, she was laying up for herself disappointment at the least, if not the bitterest disillusion; but there was no one to throw cold water on her hopes, and she filled the air with castles of every style of architecture that her fancy suggested, without any hindrance from doubt or misgiving.

She dressed quickly, in the gayest humour, but with even more care than she usually bestowed upon her appearance; a subject to which she always gave the fullest attention.

"Which dress will Mademoiselle wear?" the maid asked her.

"Why, my prettiest, naturally," she replied.

"What, the white one that Mademoiselle wore for the marriage of Monsieur, her papa?" inquired Therese, scandalized at the idea of such a precious garment being put on before breakfast.

"That very one," Juliet assured her, undaunted; and was arrayed in it, in spite of obvious disapproval.

After breakfast they went out, and, inquiring their way to Bond Street, flattened their noses against the shop windows to their mutual satisfaction.

They had it almost to themselves, for there were not many people left in that part of London; but more than one head was turned to gaze at the pretty girl in the garden-party dress, who stood transfixed before shop after shop. This amusement lasted till half-past eleven, when they returned to the hotel for Juliet to give the final pats to her hair, and to retilt her hat to an angle possibly more becoming, before she started to keep her appointment with the solicitors. The next twenty minutes were spent in cross-examining the hotel porter as to the time it would take to drive to her destination, and, having decided to start at ten minutes to twelve, in wondering whether the quarter of an hour which had still to elapse would ever come to an end.

At three minutes to twelve she rang the bell of the office of Messrs. Findlay & Ince.

CHAPTER III

A gloomy little clerk climbed down from a high stool where he sat writing, and opened the door.

"Oh yes, Miss Juliet Byrne," he said when Juliet had told him her name. "Mr. Findlay is expecting you. Will you walk upstairs, Miss Byrne, please. I think you have an appointment for twelve o'clock? This way, if you please."

He led the way up a steep and narrow flight of stairs, which rose out of the black shadows at the end of the passage.

"Ladies find these stairs rather dark, I'm afraid," he remarked pleasantly, as he held open a door and ushered Juliet and her maid into an empty room. "Will you kindly wait here," he continued. "Mr. Findlay is engaged for the moment. You are a leetle before your time, I believe." He pulled out his watch and examined it closely. "Not _quite_ the hour yet," he repeated, and closed it with a snap. "But Mr. Findlay will see you as

soon as he is disengaged."

With a flourish of his handkerchief he withdrew, shutting the door behind him.

Juliet sat down on a hard chair covered with green leather, and told her maid to take another. Her spirits were damped. The sight of Mr. Nicol, as the clerk was named, often had that effect upon persons who saw him for the first time; indeed he was found to be a very useful check on troublesome clients, who arrived full of determination to have their own way, and were often so cowed by their preliminary interview with Nicol as to feel it a privilege and a relief subsequently to be bullied by Mr. Ince, or persuaded by Mr. Findlay into the belief that what they had previously decided on was the last thing advisable to do.

Mr. Findlay frequently remarked to Mr. Ince, when his partner's easily roused temper was more highly tried than usual by some imbecile mistake of the clerk's, that Nicol might have faults as a clerk and as a man, but that, as a buffer, he was the nearest approach to perfection obtainable in this world of makeshifts.

To which Mr. Ince would reply with point and fluency that fenders could be had by the dozen from any shipping warehouse, at a lower cost than one week's salary of Nicol's would represent, and would be far more efficient in the office. Still he did not suggest dismissing the man.

Juliet, as she sat and looked round the musty little waiting-room, felt that here was an end of her dreams of the resplendent family she was to find pining to take her to its heart. She felt certain that she could never have any feelings in common with people who could employ a firm of solicitors which in its turn was served by the man who had received her. Romance and the clerk could never, she thought, meet under one roof. And such a roof! The room in which she sat was so dark, so gloomy, so bare and cheerless, that Juliet began to wonder whether she would not have been wiser not to have come. This was not a place, surely, which fond parents would choose for a long-deferred meeting with their child, after years of separation. She walked to the window, but the only view was of a blank wall, and that so close that she could have touched it by leaning out. No wonder the room was dark, even at midday in August. The walls were lined with bookshelves, where heavy volumes, all dealing with the same subject, that of law, stood shoulder to shoulder in stout bindings of brown leather.

There was a fireplace of cracked and dirty marble with an engraving hung over it, representing the coronation of Queen Victoria. A gas stove occupied the grate, and a gas bracket stuck out from the wall on either side of the picture.

On the small round mahogany table that stood in the middle of the room lay a Bible, and a copy of the St. James's Gazette, which was dated a week back. Juliet took it up and read an account of a cricket match without much enthusiasm. Then she flung it down and wandered about the room once more; but she had exhausted all its possibilities; and though

she took a volume entitled *_Causes Celebres_* from the shelf, and turned its pages hopefully, she put it back with a grimace at its dullness and a sort of surprise at finding anything drier than the cricket.

She had waited half an hour, when the door opened and the face of Nicol was introduced round the corner of it.

"Will you please come this way," he said.

Telling her maid to stay where she was, Juliet followed him. He opened the other door on the landing, and announced her in a loud voice as, with a quickened pulse, she passed him, and entered the room.

There were two men standing by the hearth. One of them came forward to receive her.

"How do you do, Miss Byrne," he said; "I am glad you were able to come. I am Jeremy Findlay, at your service."

Mr. Findlay was a man of moderate height, with a long pointed nose which he was in the habit of putting down to within an inch or two of his desk when he was looking for any particular paper, for he was very short sighted. It rather conveyed the impression that he was poking about with it, and that he hunted for questionable clauses or illegalities in a document, much as a pig might hunt for truffles in a wood. For the rest, he was middle-aged, with hair nearly white, and small grey whiskers. He beamed at Juliet through gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

"Let me introduce my friend," he said, mumbling something.

Juliet did not catch the name, but she supposed that this was Mr. Ince.

The other man stepped forward and shook hands, but said nothing. He was a thin, pallid creature, rather above the average height, and had the drooping shoulders of a scholar. His face, which was long and narrow, looked pale and emaciated, and though his blue eyes had a kindly twinkle it seemed to Juliet that they burned with a feverish brightness. His nose was long and slightly hooked, and beneath it the mouth was hidden by a heavy red moustache; while his hair, though not of so bright a colour, had a reddish tinge about it. He appeared to be about fifty years of age, but this was due to a look of tiredness habitual to his expression, and, in part, to actual bad health. In reality he was younger.

"Pray take this chair, Miss Byrne," Mr. Findlay was saying. "We are anxious to have a little conversation with you. I am sure you quite understand that we should not have asked you to come all the way from Belgium unless your presence was of considerable importance. How important it is I really hardly know myself, but I repeat that I would not have urged you to take so long a journey if I had not had serious reason to think that it was desirable for your own sake that you should do so. I may say at once that the matter is a family one; but before going further I must ask your permission to put one or two questions to you, which I hope you will believe are not prompted by any feeling of

idle curiosity on my part."

He paused, and Juliet murmured some words of acquiescence. Mr. Findlay took off his eyeglasses, glared at them, replaced them, and ran his nose over the surface of the papers on his writing-table.

"Ah, here it is!" he exclaimed triumphantly, pouncing on a folded sheet and lifting it to his eyes. "Just a few notes," he explained.

"We wrote you care of Sir Arthur Byrne," he resumed; "are you a member of his family?"

Here was a disturbing question for Juliet. She had imagined, until this instant, that she was on the point of being told who her family was, and now this man was asking for information from her. Tears of disappointment would not be kept from her eyes.

"I am a member of Sir Arthur's household," she stammered.

"Are you not his daughter, then?" asked Mr. Findlay.

"No, I am not really," Juliet replied.

"Then may I ask what relation you are to him?" said the lawyer.

"I am his adopted daughter," said Juliet. "I have always called him 'Father.'"

"Are you not any relation at all?" pursued Mr. Findlay.

"I believe not."

"Then, Miss Byrne, I hope you will not think it an impertinent question if I ask, who are you?"

"I don't know," acknowledged poor Juliet. "I was hoping you would tell me that. I thought, I imagined, that that was why you sent for me."

"You astonish me," said Mr. Findlay. "Do you mean to say that your family has never made any attempt to communicate with you?"

"No, never."

"And that Sir Arthur Byrne has never told you anything as to your birth? Surely you must have questioned him about it?"

"He has told me all he knows," said Juliet, "but that amounts to nothing."

"Indeed; that is very strange. He must have had dealings with the people you were with before he adopted you. He must at least know their name?"

"I don't know," said Juliet. "He doesn't know either, I am sure. It

wasn't Sir Arthur who adopted me. It was the lady he married. A Mrs. Meredith. She is dead."

"But he must have heard about you from her," insisted Mr. Findlay. "He would not have taken a child into his household without knowing anything at all about it."

"His wife told him that I was the daughter of a friend of hers, and begged him not to ask her any more about me. He was very devoted to her, and he did as she wished. He has been most kind to me; but I am sure he would be as glad as I should be to discover my relations. I am dreadfully disappointed that you don't know anything about them. We all thought I was going to find my family at last."

Juliet's voice quavered a little. She had built too much on this interview.

"I am really extremely sorry not to be able to give you any information," Mr. Findlay said.

He turned towards the other man with an interrogative glance, and was met by a nod of the head, at which he leant back in his chair, crossed his legs and folded his hands upon them, with the expression of some one who has played his part in the game, and now retires in favour of another competitor. The pale man moved his chair a little forward and took up the conversation.

"Are you really quite certain that Sir Arthur Byrne has told you all he knows?" he said earnestly, fixing on Juliet a look at once grave and eager.

"Yes," she answered. "I can see that he is as puzzled as I am. And he would be glad enough to find a way to get rid of me," she added bitterly.

"I thought you said you were attached to him," said the stranger in surprise, "and that he had been very kind to you?"

"Yes," said Juliet, "he has, and I am as fond of him as possible. But he has three stepdaughters now; he has married again, you know. And he is not very well off. I am a great expense, besides being an extra girl. I don't blame him for thinking I am one too many."

There was a long pause, during which Juliet was conscious of being closely scrutinized.

"I think I may be able to give you news of your family," said the pale man unexpectedly. "That is, if you are the person I think you are likely to be."

"Oh," exclaimed Juliet, "can you really?"

"Well, it is possible," admitted the other. "I can't say for certain yet."

"Oh, do, do tell me!" cried the girl.

"Out of the question, at present," he replied firmly. "I must first satisfy myself as to whose child you are, and on that point you appear able to give me no assistance. You must wait till I can find out something further about this matter of your adoption. And even then," he added, "it is not certain if I can tell you. You must understand that, though certain family secrets have been placed in my possession, it does not depend upon myself whether or not I shall ultimately reveal them to you."

Juliet's face fell for a moment, but she refused to allow herself to be discouraged.

"There is a chance for me, anyhow!" she exclaimed. "How I hope you will be allowed to tell me in the end! But why," she went on, turning to Mr. Findlay, "did you make me think you knew nothing at all about me. I suppose the family secrets your partner speaks of are the secrets of my family?"

"My dear young lady," said Mr. Findlay, "Lord Ashiel is not my partner. On the contrary, he is an old client of ours, and it was at his request that we wrote to you as we did. We know no more about your affairs than you have told us yourself."

"Oh," murmured Juliet, confused at her mistake. "I thought you were Mr. Ince," she apologized; "I am so sorry."

"Not very flattering to poor Ince I'm afraid," said Lord Ashiel, smiling at her. "He's ten years younger than I am, I'm sorry to say, and I would change places with him very willingly. Now, if you had mistaken me for Nicol, that undertaker clerk of Findlay's, who always looks as if he's been burying his grandmother, I should have been decidedly hurt. What in the world do you keep that fellow in the office for, Findlay? To frighten away custom?"

Mr. Findlay laughed.

"He's a more useful person than you imagine," he said. "Though I must say Ince agrees with you, and is always at me about the poor man. Some day I hope you will both see his sterling qualities."

"I am afraid you must think I have given you a great deal of trouble for very little reason," Lord Ashiel said to Juliet. "But perhaps there will be more result than at present can seem clear to you. I may go so far as to say that I hope so most sincerely. But, if the secret of which I spoke just now is ever to be confided to you, it will be necessary for you and me to know each other a little better. I have a proposal to make to you, which I fear you may think our acquaintance rather too short and unconventional to justify."

He paused with a trace of embarrassment, and Juliet wondered what could

be coming.

"It is not convenient for me to stay in London just now," he went on after a minute, "and I am sure you must find it very disagreeable at this time of the year; and yet it is very important that I should see more of you. It is, in fact, part of the conditions under which I may be able to reveal these family secrets of yours to you. That is to say, if they should turn out to be indeed yours. I came up from the Highlands last night. I have a place on the West Coast, where at this moment I have a party of people staying with me for shooting. My sister is entertaining them in my absence, but I must get back to my duties of host. What I want to suggest is that you should pay us a visit at Inverashiel."

"Thank you very much," said Juliet doubtfully. "I should love to, but--I don't know whether my father would allow me."

"Your father?" exclaimed Lord Ashiel and Mr. Findlay in one breath.

"Sir Arthur Byrne, I mean," she corrected herself.

"You might telegraph to him," urged Lord Ashiel. "And I, myself, will write. You might mention my sister to him. I think he used to know her. Mrs. John Haviland. But, indeed, it is very important that you should come, more important than you think, perhaps."

He seemed extraordinarily anxious, now, lest she should refuse.

"Perhaps," suggested Mr. Findlay, "Miss Byrne would like to think over the idea, and let you know later in the day."

"A very good plan," said Lord Ashiel. "Yes, of course you would like to think it over. Will you telephone to me at the Carlton after lunch? Thanks so much. Good-bye for the present."

He seized his hat and stick and darted to the door. "You talk to her, Findlay!" he cried, and disappeared.

Juliet and Mr. Findlay were left confronting one another.

"That will be the best plan," the lawyer repeated. "Think it over, Miss Byrne. I am sure you would enjoy the visit to Scotland. Inverashiel is a most interesting old place, both historically and for the sake of its beautiful scenery. A week or two of Highland air could not fail to be of benefit to your health, even if nothing further came of it, so to speak."

"I should love it," Juliet said again. "But, Mr. Findlay, I don't know Lord Ashiel, or hardly know him. How can I go off and stay with someone I never met before to-day?"

"The circumstances are unusual," said the lawyer. "I fancy Lord Ashiel is anxious to lose no time. He is in bad health, poor fellow. I am afraid he will worry himself a good deal if you cannot make up your mind to go."

"You see," said Juliet, troubled, "I know nothing about him. I don't know what my father--I mean, Sir Arthur would say."

"I am sure your father would have no objection whatever to your making friends with Lord Ashiel," Mr. Findlay assured her. "He is one of the most respectable, the most domesticated of peers. Not very cheerful company, perhaps, but no one in the world can justly say a word against him in any way. He has had a sad time lately; his wife and only child died within a month of each other, only two or three years ago. They had been married quite a short time. Since then, his sister, Mrs. Haviland, keeps house for him; but he does not entertain much, I am told, except during the autumn in Scotland. You need have no hesitation in accepting this invitation, Miss Byrne. I am a married man, and the father of a family, and I should only be too delighted if one of my daughters had such an opportunity."

"Well," said Juliet, "I think I will risk it, and go. I am old enough to take care of myself, in any case." This she said haughtily, with her nose in the air. And then, with a sudden drop to her usual manner, she exclaimed in a tone of gaiety, "What fun it will be!"

"I am sure you will not regret your decision," repeated Mr. Findlay, as she got up to go. "You won't forget to let Lord Ashiel know, will you?"

"No, I will telephone to him at once. But I will telegraph home too, of course."

Excitement over this new plan had almost dispelled the earlier disappointment, and if Juliet's spirits, as she drove back to Jermyn Street, were not quite as overflowing high as when she had started out, they were good enough to make her smile to herself and to every one she met during the rest of the day, and to hum gay little tunes when no one was near, and altogether to feel very happy and pleased and possessed by the conviction that something delightful was about to happen. She sent off her telegram to Sir Arthur, spending some time over it, and spoiling a dozen telegraph forms, before she could find satisfactory words in which to convey her plans with an appearance of deference to authority. Then she called up the Carlton Hotel on the telephone, and was much put out when she heard that Lord Ashiel was not staying there, or even expected.

It was the hall porter of her hotel who came to the rescue, by suggesting that she should try the Carlton Club, of which she had never before heard.

From the quickness with which Lord Ashiel answered her, he might have been sitting waiting at the end of the wire, and he expressed great pleasure at her acceptance of his invitation. Indeed, she could hear from the tone of his voice that his gratification was no mere empty form. It was arranged that she should travel down on the following night, Lord Ashiel promising to engage a sleeping berth for her on the eight o'clock train. He himself was going North that same evening. He had just been writing a letter to Sir Arthur Byrne, he told her. He hoped she had some

thick dresses with her; she would want them in Scotland.

"I am afraid I haven't," she said. "I only expected to stay in London for a day or two, you know."

"Well," said the voice at the end of the telephone, "perhaps you can get a waterproof or something, between this and to-morrow night. I am afraid I don't know the names of any ladies' tailors, but there are lots about," he concluded vaguely.

"I suppose I had better," said Juliet doubtfully. "I wonder if the shops here will trust me. The fact is, I haven't got very much extra money. I think perhaps I'd better wait a day or two till I can have some more sent me."

"My dear child," came the answer in horrified tones, "you must on no account put off coming. Of course you are not prepared for all this extra expense. You must allow me to be your banker. I insist upon it. Your family, in whose confidence I happen to be, would never forgive me if I allowed you to continue to be dependent on Sir Arthur Byrne."

"It is very kind of you," Juliet began. "But suppose I turn out to be some one different. You know, you said--"

"If you do, you shall repay me," he replied. "In the meantime I will send you round a small sum to do your shopping with. Let me see, where are you staying?"

An hour later a bank messenger arrived with an envelope containing L100 in notes. Juliet had never seen so much money in her life, and thought it far too much. "I shall be sure to lose it," was her first thought. Her second was to deposit it with the proprietor of the hotel; after which she felt safer. Then, in huge delight, she sallied forth again with her maid, the alluring memory of some of the shop windows into which she had gazed that morning calling to her loudly; she had never thought to look at those fascinating garments from the other side of the glass. Intoxicating hours followed, in which a couple of tweed dresses were purchased that seemed as if they must have been made on purpose for her; nor were thick walking shoes, and country hats, and other accessories neglected. By evening her room was strewn with cardboard boxes, and on Wednesday more were added, so that a trunk to pack them in had to be bought as well. The shops were very empty; Juliet had the entire attention of the shop people, and revelled in her purchases. Time flew, and she was quite sorry, as she drove to Euston on the following evening, to think that she was leaving this fascinating town of London.

CHAPTER IV

On Tuesday afternoon, when Juliet, having hung up the telephone through

which she had been conversing with Lord Ashiel, hurried out to see what Bond Street could provide her with, a little man was sitting writing in a luxuriously furnished room in a flat in Whitehall. He was small and thin, and possessed a pair of extraordinarily bright and intelligent brown eyes, which saw a good deal more of what happened around him than perhaps any other eyes within a radius of a mile from where he sat. He was, in other words, observant to a very high degree; and, what was more remarkable, he knew how to use his powers of observation. There was not a criminal in the length and breadth of the country who did not wonder uneasily whether he had really left the scene of his crime as devoid of clues as he imagined, when he heard that the celebrated detective, Gimblet, had visited the spot in pursuit of his investigations.

For this was the man, who, in a few years, had unravelled more apparently insoluble mysteries, and caused the arrest of more hitherto evasive scoundrels, than his predecessors had managed to secure in a decade. The name of Gimblet was known and detested wherever a coiner carried on his forbidden craft, or a blackmailer concocted his cowardly plans; burglars and forgers cursed freely when he was mentioned, and there was hardly an illicit trade in the country which had not suffered at one time or another from his inquisitive habit of interesting himself in other people's affairs. Scotland Yard officials were never too proud to call upon him for help, and many a difficulty he had helped them out of, though he refused an offer of a regular post in the Criminal Investigation Department, preferring to be at liberty to choose what cases he would take up. Above all things he loved the strange and inexplicable. Gimblet had not always been a detective. Indeed, he often smiled to himself when he thought of the extraordinary confidence which the public now elected to repose in him.

No one was more conscious than himself that he was far from being infallible; in fact, his admirers appeared to him to be wilfully blind to that elementary truth; so that when he failed to bring a case to a successful issue people were apt to show an amount of disappointment that he, for his part, thought very unreasonable. It was, perhaps, in the nature of things that the puzzles he solved correctly received so much more publicity than was given to his mistakes; but he often could not avoid wishing that less were expected of him, and that his reputation had not grown so tropically on what he could but consider insufficient nourishment.

In early days, after leaving Oxford, he had gone into an architect's office and had flourished there; till one day an accident had turned his energies in the direction they had since taken.

A crime had been committed during the erection of a house he was building, and, when the police were at a loss to know how to account for the somewhat peculiar circumstances, the young architect, going his ordinary rounds of inspection, had seen in a flash that there was something unusual in the disposal of a portion of the building material; which observation, with certain deductions following thereon, had led to the detection and arrest of the criminal. From that time on he had been more and more drawn to the fascination of tracing events to their

causes, when these appeared connected with deeds of violence and fraud, till of late years he had completely dropped the study of the carrying powers of wood and stone for the more interesting lessons to be derived from the contemplation of the strange vagaries indulged in by his fellow human beings.

He kept, however, a strong taste for art and all that appertained to it; more especially he was devoted to the collection of old and rare bric-a-brac. There was not a curiosity shop in London that did not know him, and he was equally happy when he had discovered some dust-hidden treasure in the back regions of a secondhand furniture shop, or when he was engaged in running to earth some human vermin who up till then had lain snug in his own particular back region of crime, straining his ears, in a mixture of contempt and anxiety, as the sounds of the hunt went by.

Having finished his letter, Gimblet put his stylo in his pocket, and turned round to look at the clock.

"Twenty minutes to four," he said half-aloud. "I wish to goodness people would keep their appointments punctually, or else not come at all."

Five more minutes passed, and he got up and went into the hall.

"Higgs," he called, and his faithful servant and general factotum came out of the pantry.

"I am going out," said his master, taking up his straw hat. "If anyone calls, say I could not wait any longer. Ah, there's the front-door bell. Just see who it is."

He retreated to his sitting-room while Higgs went to the door of the flat. A minute or two later Lord Ashiel was ushered in.

"I'm very sorry I'm late," said he, as the door closed behind him, "but you know what kept me."

"Not the young lady, surely," said Gimblet; "you were to see her at twelve o'clock this morning, weren't you?"

"Yes, but she telephoned to me after lunch. By Jove, Gimblet, I believe you have got hold of the right girl this time." Lord Ashiel's tone was enthusiastic. "If she turns out to be half as nice as she looks, I shall be ever grateful to you for routing her out."

"Indeed, I am very glad to hear it," replied the detective. "And do you observe a resemblance in her to your family; do you feel satisfied that she is your daughter?"

"I can't say I do see much likeness," Lord Ashiel confessed rather reluctantly. "I thought at one moment, when she smiled, that she was like her mother; but otherwise she did not strike me as resembling either of us, I am sorry to say."

"Did she know her history at all?" asked Gimblet. "Did she claim you as father?"

"No, she had never heard of me, as far as I could make out. And she assured me that Sir Arthur Byrne has no idea whose child she is."

"That certainly seems very improbable," Gimblet commented.

"Yes, it does. Still, I feel sure she was speaking the truth. Why, indeed, should she not do so? It seems that Byrne has married again, and that his wife has already three daughters of her own; so, as she says, he would probably be glad enough to get the fourth one off his hands, as they are not well off."

"Yes," said Gimblet. "I knew that. No, there seems no reason why Sir Arthur Byrne should not have told her about you if he knew she was your child. What is odd, is that he should not have known it."

"He had promised his first wife not to make any inquiries, it seems," said Lord Ashiel.

"Well, he is an uncommon kind of man if he kept that promise," Gimblet remarked.

"He was devoted to his first wife, this girl told me," said Lord Ashiel.

"You never knew Lena Meredith, Gimblet, or you would not be surprised that people kept their promises to her. She was my wife's friend, as I told you, and I only saw her once, but I don't think I shall ever forget her. It was just after my wife's death, and I was too heart-broken to take much notice of anyone, but she was the sort of woman who sticks in your memory, and I can quite understand a man being infatuated about her, even to the point of curbing his curiosity for a lifetime on any subject she wished him to leave alone. I went to see her, you know, about the baby. I remember, as if it was yesterday, how I told her the whole story. I told her how I had met Juliana two years before, and how, from the first, we had both known we should never care for anyone else. I told her about my old grandfather, from whom I had such great expectations, and who wouldn't hear of my marrying anyone except the cousin, still in the schoolroom, whom he had picked out as my future wife.

"It was his wish that we should be married when I was twenty-five and the girl eighteen; but I was not yet twenty-two, so that there were at least three years of grace before he could begin to try and impose his design upon us. And he was old and ill, and I had heard that the doctors didn't give him more than a year or two, at most, to live. I thought that if Juliana and I were married secretly he would die before the question of my marriage had time to become one of practical politics; and I persuaded her to agree to a private marriage, which we would announce to the world as soon as my eccentric old grandfather was safely out of it. There was no possible obstacle to our marriage except the old man's domineering temper. Juliana Sandfort was my superior in every possible sense, worldly or otherwise; but I came of a good family, was to inherit an old name and title, and a more than sufficient fortune so

long as I kept on the right side of the old Lord, and we both knew that there was no objection to be feared from her relations or from any other one of mine. In short, much as she disliked doing things in that hole-and-corner sort of way, and ashamed as I was at heart of asking her to, we neither of us could see much actual harm in the idea, and we were married accordingly at a registry office in London. Everything would have been well, and all would have gone as we hoped, but for the one unforeseen and horrible calamity. My wife died six months before my grandfather, on the day her baby was born."

Lord Ashiel paused, and sat gazing before him, over Gimblet's shoulder. There was a look on his face which showed that for the moment he was blind to the scene that lay in front of him, and that he saw in place of the bureau which stood opposite to him, and of the Oriental china which was the detective's special pride, and on which his eyes seemed to be fixed, some vision of the past which was far more real than the unsubstantial present. Presently he went on talking in a reflective undertone:

"All this I told Mrs. Meredith, and a great deal besides, for I was still in the first violence of bitter, self-reproachful grief. I wanted to be rid of the child, the cause of the catastrophe, whom I hated as vehemently as I had loved its mother, and I begged Mrs. Meredith to help me to dispose of it in such a fashion that, to me at least, the little one should be to all intents and purposes as dead as she was. Babies, I knew, had not a very strong hold on life, and I hoped, as a matter of fact, that it might really die, but this I did not dare to say aloud. Mrs. Meredith was kind to me. I remember well how good and sympathetic she was. She had heard most of the story from Juliana, whose friend she was, and it was at her house that the child was born. We had confided in no one else. She sat silently for a while after I had finished what I had to say, till at last she turned to me and tried to persuade me to alter my intention of disowning the baby. But I repeated doggedly that unless she had some alternative way to suggest of getting rid of it, I meant to leave the little girl at the door of one of the foundling hospitals, and that I would take her that very night.

"At length, seeing that I was resolved, she said she thought she could manage better than that. She had a friend, she said, an elderly Russian lady, who was a widow and childless. This lady was anxious to adopt a little English girl, and had lately written to ask her to find her a baby whom she could bring up as her own child. There was no reason why Juliana's baby should not be the one. She would write at once and suggest it. I was greatly relieved at this idea. Although I had been determined to do as I proposed, whatever opposition I might meet with, my conscience had not been willing to let me leave my child on a doorstep without protesting, and, little though I heeded its condemnation, I was glad to be able to get my own way and at the same time to silence the voice of my inward critic.

"The plan seemed simplicity itself. My wife, as I have told you, had no parents living. Her brothers and sisters, who were all married and living in different parts of the country, had been led to believe that

her death was the result of an accident. Mrs. Meredith had even managed to prevail on the doctor to lend himself to this fiction; for, my grandfather being yet alive, there was still every reason not to declare our marriage, while there seemed to be none in favour of doing so, and I shrank from the questionings and scenes which publicity now would not fail to bring upon me. Before I left Mrs. Meredith we had agreed that she should at once communicate with her Russian friend, whose name I refused to let her tell me.

"I have told you before to-day, Gimblet, of all that has happened since. How I took passionately to books as a refuge from my sorrow; how, at my grandfather's suggestion, I had been by way of working for the Diplomatic Service; of how I now worked in good earnest, and in course of time, and after my grandfather's death, found myself attached to our embassy at Petersburg. During the two years I spent there I made the acquaintance of Countess Romaninov. One day when I was talking to her she happened to mention that she had once known an English lady, Mrs. Meredith, and I came to the conclusion that the little girl who lived with her must be none other than my own child. As you know, I could not stand living in the same town as she did, and for that, and for other reasons, I left the Diplomatic Service and returned to England, where I have lived a quiet life on my place in Scotland ever since. Eight years ago, as you know, I married for the second time, and after a few years of comparative happiness, found myself again a widower, my second wife and her child dying within a few months of each other, when my boy was only four years old.

"It is more than a year, now," continued Lord Ashiel, after a pause, "since the girl Julia Romaninov came to my sister in London, with a letter of introduction from our ambassador in Russia. It was not until my sister invited her down to Scotland that I heard anything about her. Not, in fact, till the day before she arrived, for I always tell my sister to ask any girls she pleases to Inverashiel, and she very seldom bothers me about it. You can imagine my feelings when I heard that Julia Romaninov was expected within a few hours, and had indeed already started from London. It was too late to try and stop her, and my first impulse was flight. But on second thoughts I changed my mind, and stayed. Time had dulled the feelings with which I had contemplated her share in the tragedy that attended her birth, and I was not without a certain curiosity to see this young creature for whose existence I was responsible.

"I waited; she came; she stayed six weeks. You know the result. My sister liked her; my nephews, my other guests, every one, except myself, was charmed with her. And I, for some reason, could never stand the girl. I told myself over and over again that it was mere prejudice; the remains of the violent opposition I felt towards her when she was unknown to me; a survival, unconscious and unwilling, of the hatred I had allowed myself to nourish for the baby of a day old, which had made it impossible that she and I should inhabit the same town when she was no more than a child in pinafores. But I could not reason myself out of my dislike, and it culminated a few weeks ago when I found that my sister was anxious to have her with us in the North again this autumn. As you remember, I came

to you, and told you the facts. I made you understand how repulsive it was to me to think that this girl might be my child, and begged you to sift the matter as far as was possible, and to find out if there were not a chance that I was mistaken in thinking it was Countess Romaninov who had been Lena Meredith's friend."

"Yes," said Gimblet, "and all I could discover at first was that the two ladies had indeed been acquainted. It is difficult to get at the truth when both of them have been dead for so many years, and when you will not allow me so much as to hint that you feel any interest in the matter. People are shy of answering questions relating to the private affairs of their friends when they think they are prompted by idle curiosity, and in this case it seems very doubtful whether anyone even knows the answers. But in the course of my inquiries I soon discovered the fact that Mrs. Meredith herself had adopted a child, and it certainly seems more than possible that it may have been yours and her friend's. As far as I can find out, both these young ladies are of about the same age, but no one seems to know exactly when either of them first appeared on the scene. If we can only get hold of the nurses! But at present I can find no trace of them, and you won't let me advertise."

"Gimblet, I shall be ever grateful to you," repeated Lord Ashiel. "I had no idea that Mrs. Meredith had adopted a child. I never saw her again, as I have told you, and only heard vaguely that she had married and was living abroad. I purposely avoided asking for news of her. I wished to forget everything that was past. As if that had been possible!"

"I hoped," said Gimblet, "that you would have seen some strong likeness in this young lady to yourself, or to your first wife. That would have clinched the matter to all intents and purposes. But, as things are, I shouldn't build too much on the hope that she is your daughter. It may turn out to be the girl adopted by Countess Romaninov."

"I hope not, I hope not," said Lord Ashiel earnestly. "I have got her to promise to come to Scotland, and in a few days I may get some definite clue as to which of them it is. It is a very odd coincidence that both the girls bear names so much like that of my poor wife's." He paused reflectively, and then added, "In the meantime you will go on with your inquiries, will you not?"

"I will," said Gimblet. "And I hope for better luck."

A silence followed. Lord Ashiel half rose to go, then sat down again. Evidently he had something more to say, but hesitated to say it. At last he spoke:

"When I was at St. Petersburg, twenty years ago, I was aroused to a state of excitement and indignation by the social and political evils which were then so much in evidence to the foreigner who sojourned in the country of the Czars. I was young and impressionable, impulsive and unbalanced in my judgments, I am afraid; at all events I resented certain seeming injustices which came to my notice, and my resentment took a practical and most foolish form. To be short, I was so ill-advised as to

join a secret society, and have done nothing but regret it ever since."

"I can well understand your regretting it," said the detective. "People who join those societies are apt to find themselves let in for a good deal more than they bargained for."

"It was so, at all events so far as I am concerned," said Lord Ashiel, "I had, you may be sure, only the wildest idea of what serious and extremely unpleasant consequences my unreflecting action would entail. Withdrawal from these political brotherhoods is to all intents and purposes a practical impossibility; but, in a sense, I withdrew from all participation in its affairs as soon as I realized to what an extent the theories of its leaders, as to the best means to adopt by which to rectify the injustices we all agreed in deploring, differed from my own ideas on the subject. And I should not have been able to withdraw, even in the negative way I did, if accident had not put into my hand a weapon of defence against the tyranny of the Society."

Lord Ashiel paused hesitatingly, and Gimblet murmured encouragingly:

"And that was?"

"No," said Lord Ashiel, after a moment's silence, "I must not tell you more. We are, I know, to all appearances, safe from eavesdroppers or interruption; but, if a word of what I know were to leak out by some incredible agency, my life would not be worth a day's purchase. As it is, I am alarmed; I believe these people wish for my death. In fact, there is no doubt on that subject. But they dare not attempt it openly. I have told them that if I should die under suspicious circumstances of any sort, the weapon I spoke of will inevitably be used to avenge my death, and they know me to be a man of my word. For all these years that threat has been my safeguard, but now I am beginning to think that they are trying other means of getting me out of the way."

"It is a pity," said Gimblet, "that you do not speak to me more openly. I think it is highly probable, from what I know of the methods resorted to by Nihilists in general, that you may be in very grave danger. Indeed, I strongly advise you to report the whole matter to the police."

"I wish I could tell you everything," said Lord Ashiel, "but even if I dared, you must remember that I am sworn to secrecy, and I cannot see that because I have, by doing so, placed myself in some peril, that on that account I am entitled to break my word. No, I cannot tell you any more, but in spite of that, I want you to do me a service."

"I am afraid I can't help you without fuller knowledge," said Gimblet.
"What do you think I can do?"

"You can do this," said Lord Ashiel. He put his hand in his pocket and Gimblet heard a crackling of paper. "I am thinking out a hiding-place for some valuable documents that are in my possession, and when I have decided on it I will write to you and explain where I have put them, using a cipher of which the key is enclosed in an envelope I have here

in my pocket, and which I will leave with you when I go. Take charge of it for me, and in the course of the next week or so I will send you a cipher letter describing where the papers are concealed. Do not read it unless the occasion arises. I can trust you not to give way to curiosity, but if anything happens to me, if I die a violent death, or equally if I die under the most apparently natural circumstances, I want you to promise you will investigate those circumstances; and, if anything should strike you as suspicious in connection with what I have told you, you will be able to interpret my cipher letter, find the document I have referred to, and act on the information it contains. Will you undertake to do this for me?"

"I will, certainly," Gimblet answered readily, "but I hope the occasion will not arise. I beg you to break a vow which was extorted from you by false representations and which cannot be binding on you. Do confide fully in me; I do not at all like the look of this business."

"No, no," replied Lord Ashiel, smiling. "You must let me be the judge of whether my word is binding on me or not. As you say, I hope nothing will happen to justify my perhaps uncalled-for nervousness. In any case it will be a great comfort and relief to me to know that, if it does, the scoundrels will not go unpunished."

"They shall not do that," said Gimblet fervently. "You can make your mind easy on that score, at least. But I advise you to send your documents to the bank. They will be safer there than in any hiding-place you can contrive."

"I might want to lay my hand upon them at any moment," said Lord Ashiel, "and I admit I don't like parting with my only weapon of defence. Still, I dare say you are right really, and I will think it over. But mind, I don't want you to take any steps unless, you can satisfy yourself that these people have a hand in my death. Please be very careful to make certain of that. My health is not good, and grows worse. I may easily die without their interference; but I suspect that, if they do get me, they will manage the affair so that it has all the look of having been caused by the purest misadventure. That is what I fear. Not exactly murder; certainly no violent open assault. But we are all liable to suffer from accidents, and what is to prevent my meeting with a fatal one? That is more the line they will adopt, if, as I imagine, they have decided on my death."

"If ever there were a case in which prevention is better than cure," said Gimblet, "I think you will own that we have it here. If I had some hint of the quarter from which you expect danger, I might at least suggest some rudimentary precautions. What kind of 'accident' do you imagine likely to occur?"

"That I can't tell," replied Lord Ashiel. "I only know that these enemies of mine are resourceful people, who are apt to make short work of anyone whose existence threatens their safety or the success of their designs. I am, by your help, taking a precaution to ensure that I shall not die unavenged. They must be taught that murder cannot be committed in this

country with impunity. And I am very careful not to trust myself out of England. If I crossed the Channel it would be to go to my certain death. Otherwise I should have gone myself to see Sir Arthur Byrne. But in this island the man who kills even so unpopular a person as a member of the House of Lords does not get off with a few years' imprisonment, as he may in some of the continental countries; and the Nihilists, for the most part, know that as well as I do."

Gimblet followed Lord Ashiel into the hall with the intention of showing him out of the flat, but the sudden sound of the door bell ringing made him abandon this courtesy and retreat to shelter.

He did not wish to be denied all possibility of refusing an interview to some one he might not want to see.

So it was Higgs who opened the door and ushered out the last visitor, at the same time admitting the newcomer.

This proved to be a small, slight woman dressed in deepest black and wearing the long veil of a widow, who was standing with her back to the door, apparently watching the rapid descent of the lift which had brought her to the landing of No. 7.

She did not move when the door behind her opened, and Lord Ashiel, emerging from it in a hurry to catch the lift before it vanished, nearly knocked her down. She gave a startled gasp and stepped hastily to one side into the dark shadows of the passage as he, muttering an apology, darted forward to the iron gateway and applied his finger heavily to the electric bell-push. But the liftboy had caught sight of him with the tail of his eye, and was already reascending.

His anxiety allayed, Lord Ashiel turned again to express his regrets to the lady he had inadvertently collided with, but she had disappeared into the flat, of which Higgs was even then closing the door.

Ashiel stepped into the lift and sat down rather wearily on the leather-covered seat.

Although, to some extent, the relief of having unburdened his mind of secrets that had weighed upon it for so many years produced in him a certain lightness of heart to which he had long been a stranger, yet the very charm of the impression made upon him by Juliet Byrne, during his first meeting with her that morning, led him to suspect uneasily that his hopes of her proving to be his child were due rather to the pleasure it gave him to anticipate such a possibility than to any more logical reason.

He was so entirely engrossed in an honest endeavour to adjust correctly the balance of probabilities, as to remain unconscious that the lift had stopped at the ground floor, and it was not until the boy who was in charge had twice informed him of the fact, that he roused himself with an effort and left the building.

Still absorbed in his speculations and anxieties, he walked rapidly away, and, having narrowly escaped destruction beneath the wheels of more than one taxi, wandered down Northumberland Avenue on to the Embankment. He crossed to the farther side, turned mechanically to the right and walked obliviously on.

It was not until he came nearly to Westminster Bridge that he remembered the cipher that he had prepared for Gimblet, and that he had, after all, finally left without giving it to him. It was still in his pocket, and the discovery roused him from his abstraction.

He took a taxi and drove back to the flats. A motor which had been standing before the door when he had come out was still there when he returned; so that, thinking it probably belonged to the lady he had met on the landing, and guessing that if so the detective was still occupied with her, he did not ask to see him again, but handed the envelope over to Higgs when he opened the door, with strict injunctions to take it immediately to his master.

CHAPTER V

The lady, whose visit to Gimblet dovetailed so neatly with the departure of his other client on that summer afternoon, was unknown to him.

He had scarcely re-entered the room and resumed his accustomed seat by the window when Higgs announced her.

"A lady to see you, sir."

The lady was already in the doorway. She must have followed Higgs from the hall, and now stood, hesitating, on the threshold.

"What name?" breathed Gimblet; but Higgs only shook his head.

The detective went forward and spoke to his visitor.

"Please come in," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

And he pushed a chair towards her.

"Thank you," said the lady, taking the seat he offered. "I hope I do not disturb you; but I have come on business," she added, as the door closed behind Higgs.

"Yes?" said Gimblet interrogatively. "You will forgive me, but I didn't catch your name when my man announced you."

"He didn't say it," she replied. "I had not told him. I am sure you would not remember my name, and it is of no consequence at present."

"As you wish," said the detective.

But he wondered who this unknown woman could be. When she said he would not remember her name, did she mean to imply that he had once been acquainted with it? If so, she was right in thinking that he did not recognize her now; but, if she did not choose to raise the thick crape veil that hid her face, she could hardly expect him to do so.

He wondered whether she kept her veil lowered with the intention of preventing his recognizing her, or whether in truth she were anxious not to expose grief-swollen features to an unsympathetic gaze.

Her voice, which was low and sorrowful, though at the same time curiously resonant, seemed to suggest that she was in great trouble. She spoke, he fancied, with a trace of foreign accent.

For the rest, all that he could tell for certain about her was that she was short and slender, with small feet, and hands, from which she was now engaged in deliberately withdrawing a pair of black suede gloves.

He watched her in silence. He always preferred to let people tell their stories at their own pace and in their own way, unless they were of those who plainly needed to be helped out with questions.

And about this woman there was no suspicion of embarrassment; her whole demeanour spoke of calmness and self-possession.

"I believe," she said at last, "that you are a private detective. I come to ask for your help in a matter of some difficulty. Some papers of the utmost importance, not only to me but to others, are in the possession of a person who intends to profit by the information contained in them to do myself and my friends an irreparable injury. You can imagine how anxious we are to obtain them from him."

"Do I understand that this person threatens you with blackmail?" asked Gimblet.

The lady hesitated.

"Something of the kind," she replied after a moment's pause.

"And you have so far given in to his demands?"

"Yes," admitted the visitor. "Up till now we have been obliged to submit."

"Has he proposed any terms on which he will be willing to return you the papers?" asked the detective.

"No," she replied. "I do not think any terms are possible."

"How did this person obtain possession of the papers?" Gimblet asked

after a moment. "Did he steal them from you?"

"No."

"From your friends?"

She hesitated.

"No--not exactly."

"From whom, then?" asked Gimblet in surprise. "I suppose they were yours in the first place?"

"He has always had them," she said reluctantly; "but they must not remain his."

"Do you mean they are his own?" exclaimed Gimblet. "In that case it is you who propose to steal them!"

"No," replied the strange lady calmly. "I want you to do that."

"I'm sorry," said Gimblet; "that is not in my line of business. I'm afraid you made a mistake in coming to me. I cannot undertake your commission."

"Money is no object; we shall ask you to name your own price," urged his visitor.

But the detective shook his head.

"It is a matter of life and death," she said, and her voice betrayed an agitation which could not have been inferred from her motionless shrouded figure. "If you refuse to help me, not one life, but many, will be endangered."

"If you can offer me convincing proof of that," said Gimblet, "I might feel it my duty to help you. I don't say I should, but I might. In any case I can do nothing unless you are perfectly open and frank with me. Expect no assistance from me unless you tell me everything, and then only if I think it right to give it."

For the first time she showed some signs of confusion. The hand upon her lap moved restlessly and she turned her head slowly towards the window as if in search of suitable words. But she did not speak or rise, though she gradually fidgeted round in her chair till she faced the writing-table; and so sat, with her head leaning on her hand, in silent consideration.

It was clear she did not like Gimblet's terms; and after a few minutes had passed in a silence as awkward as it was suggestive he pushed back his chair and stood up. He hoped she would take the hint and bring an unprofitable and embarrassing interview to an end.

But she did not appear to notice him, and still sat lost in her

own thoughts.

Suddenly the door opened and Higgs appeared.

Gimblet looked at him with questioning disapproval.

It was an inflexible rule of his that when engaged with a client he was not to be disturbed.

Higgs, well acquainted with this rule, hovered doubtfully in the doorway, displaying on the salver he carried the blue, unaddressed envelope Lord Ashiel had told him to deliver at once.

"It's a note, sir," he murmured hesitatingly. "The gentleman who was with you a little while ago came back with it. He asked me to be sure and bring it in at once."

He avoided Gimblet's reproachful eye and stammered uneasily:

"Put it down on that table and go," said the detective. He indicated a little table by the door, and Higgs hastily placed the letter on it and fled, with the uncomfortable sensation of having been sternly reprimanded.

As a matter of fact Gimblet would have shown more indignation if he had not at heart felt rather glad of the interruption. His visitor had decidedly outstayed her welcome; and, though she stirred his curiosity sufficiently to make him wish he could induce her to raise her veil and let him see what manner of woman it was who had the effrontery to come and make him such unblushing proposals, he far more urgently desired to see the last of her. She was wasting his time and annoying him into the bargain.

As the door shut behind the servant he made a step towards her.

"If, madam, there is nothing else you wish to consult me about," he began, taking out his watch with some ostentation--"I am a busy man--"

The lady gave a little laugh, low and musical.

"I will not detain you longer," she said, also rising from her chair. "I am afraid I have cut into your afternoon, but you will still have time for a game if you hurry."

She laughed again, and moved over to the writing-table, where, among a litter of papers and writing materials, a couple of golf balls were acting as letter weights. A putter lay on the chair in front of the desk, and she took it up and swung it to and fro.

"A nice club," she remarked. "Where do you play, as a rule? There are so many good links near London; so convenient. Well, I mustn't keep you." She laid down the putter and fingered the balls for a moment. "Where have I put my gloves?" she said then, looking around to collect her belongings.

Gimblet was slightly put out at her inference that his plea of business was merely an excuse to dismiss her in order that he might go off and play golf. Heaven knew it was no affair of hers whether he played golf that day or not! But as a matter of fact he had no intention of leaving the flat that afternoon, and had merely been practising a shot or two on the carpet after lunch before Lord Ashiel's arrival. Still it was true that he had made business a pretext for getting rid of her, and this made the injustice of the widow's further inference ruffle him more than it might have if she had been entirely in the wrong. He was the most courteous of men, and that anyone should suspect him of unnecessary rudeness distressed him.

He made no reply, however, in spite of the temptation to defend himself; but stooped to pick up a diminutive black suede glove which his visitor had dropped when she took up the putter.

She thanked him and put it on, depositing, while she did so, her other glove, her handkerchief, sunshade and a small brown-paper parcel upon the writing-table at her side.

Gimblet did not appreciate seeing these articles heaped upon his correspondence. Without any comment he removed them, and stood holding them silently till she should be ready.

She took them from him soon, with a little inclination of the head which he felt was accompanied by a smile of thanks, though through the thick crape it was impossible to do more than guess at any expression.

She drew on her other glove and held out her hand again.

"My purse?" she said. "Will you not give me that too? Where have you put it? And then I must really go."

"I haven't seen any purse," said Gimblet.

"Yes, yes!" she cried. "A black silk bag! It has my purse inside it. I had it, I am sure."

She turned quickly back to the chair she had been sitting in, and taking up the cushion, shook it and peered beneath it.

"What can I have done with it? All my money is in it."

Gimblet glanced round the room. He did not remember having noticed any bag, and he was an observant person. She had probably left it in a cab. Women were always doing these things. Witness the heaped shelves at Scotland Yard.

"Perhaps you put it down in the hall?" he suggested.

"I am sure I had it when I came in here," she repeated in an agitated voice. "But it might be worth while just to look in the hall," she added

doubtfully, and moved towards the door.

Gimblet opened it for her gladly; but she came to a standstill in the doorway.

"There is nothing there, you see;" she said dolefully. "Oh, what shall I do!"

Gimblet looked over her shoulder. The hall was shadowy, with the perpetual twilight of the halls of London flats, but he fancied he could perceive a darker shadow lying beside his hat on the table near the entrance.

"Is that it? On the table?" he asked.

"Where? I don't see anything," murmured the lady; and indeed it was unlikely that she could distinguish anything in such a light from behind her veil.

"On the table by my hat," repeated Gimblet; and as she still did not move, he made a step forward into the hall.

Yes, it was her bag, beyond a doubt. A silken thing of black brocade, embroidered with scattered purple pansies.

Gimblet picked it up and turned back to his visitor. After a second's hesitation she had followed him into the hall and was coming towards him, groping her way rather blindly through the gloom.

"Oh, thanks, thanks!" she exclaimed. "How stupid of me to have left it there. Thank you again. My precious bag! I am so glad you have found it." She took the bag eagerly from him. "I am afraid I have been a nuisance, and disturbed you to no purpose. You must forgive my mistake. But now I will not keep you any longer. Good-bye."

She showed no further disposition to loiter; and Gimblet rang the bell for the lift and saw her depart with a good deal of satisfaction.

In spite of her extremely hazy ideas on the subject of other people's property, there was, he admitted, something attractive about her. Still he was very glad she had gone.

He returned to his room, taking up and pocketing Lord Ashiel's envelope as he passed the little table by the door.

He did it mechanically, for his mind was occupied with a question which must be immediately decided.

Was it, or was it not, worth while to have the woman who had just left him followed and located, and her identity ascertained?

Gimblet disliked leaving small problems unsolved, however insignificant they appeared. On the whole, he thought he might as well find out who she

was, and he turned back into the hall and called for Higgs.

If she were to be caught sight of again before leaving the house there was not a moment to lose. But Higgs did not reply, and on Gimblet's opening the pantry door he found it empty. Unknown to him, the moment the lady had departed Higgs had gone upstairs to the flat above to have a word with a friend.

The detective seized his hat and ran downstairs, but he was too late.

The widow lady, the porter told him, had gone away two or three minutes ago in the motor that had been waiting for her. No, he hadn't noticed the number of the car. Neither had he seen Higgs.

Gimblet shrugged his shoulders as he went upstairs again. After all, the matter was of no great consequence.

The widow was a cool hand, certainly, he thought, to come to him and propose he should steal for her what she wanted; but the fact of her having done so made it on the whole improbable that she was a thief, or she would not have had need of him. She was certainly a person of questionable principles, and it seemed likely that in one way or another a theft would be committed through her agency, if not by herself, as soon as the opportunity presented itself. She was, in fact, a woman on whom the police might do worse than keep an eye; but, reflected Gimblet, he was not the police, and the dishonesty of this scheming widow was really no concern of his. As he reached his door, a postman was leaving it, and two or three letters had been pushed through the flap. He let himself in and took them out of the box. They were not of great importance. A bill, an appeal for a subscription to some charity, a couple of advertisements and the catalogue of a sale of pictures in which he was interested. He turned over the leaves slowly, holding the pamphlet sideways from time to time to look at the photographs which illustrated some of the principal lots.

Presently he turned and went back into his room. He sat down in his favourite arm-chair near the window, where he habitually passed so much time gazing out on to the smooth surface of the river, and fell to ruminating on the problem presented by Lord Ashiel's story.

For a long while he sat on, huddled in the corner of an arm-chair, his elbows on the arm, his chin resting on his hand, and in his eyes the look of one who wrestles with obscure and complicated problems of mental arithmetic. From time to time, but without relaxing his expression of concentrated effort, he stretched out long artistic fingers to a box on the table, took from it a chocolate, and transferred it mechanically to his mouth. He always ate sweets when he had a problem on hand. He was trying to think of some means by which his client could be protected from the mysterious danger that threatened him; that it was a very real danger, Gimblet accepted without question; he had only seen Lord Ashiel twice in his life, but it was quite enough to make him certain that here was a man whom it would take a great deal to alarm. This was no boy crying "wolf" for the sake of making a stir.

But the more he thought, the more he saw that there was nothing to be done. A word to the police would suffice, no doubt, to precipitate matters; for, if the Nihilist Society which threatened Lord Ashiel contemplated his destruction, a hint that he might be already taking reciprocal measures would not be likely to make them feel more mercifully towards him. It was obvious that Ashiel would look with suspicion upon any Russian who might approach him, but Gimblet determined to write him a line of warning against foreigners of any description. Still, these societies sometimes had Englishmen amongst their members, and ways of enforcing obedience upon their subordinates which made any decision they might come to as good as carried out almost as soon as it was uttered.

The detective's cogitations were disturbed by Higgs, who had returned, and now brought him in some tea. He poured himself out half a cup, which he filled up with Devonshire cream. He had a peculiar taste in food, and was the despair of his excellent cook, but on this occasion he ate none of the cakes and bread and butter she had provided, the chocolates having rather taken the edge off his appetite.

From where he sat he could see, through the open window, the broad grey stretches of the river, with a barge going swiftly down on the tide; brown sails turned to gleaming copper by the slanting rays from the West. The hum and rattle of the streets came up to him murmuringly; now and then a train rumbled over Charing Cross Bridge, and the whistle of engines shrilled out above the constant low clamour of the town.

Gimblet leant out of the window and watched the barge negotiate the bridge. Then he returned to his chair, and taking Lord Ashiel's envelope out of his pocket looked it over thoughtfully before opening it. He had no doubts as to what it contained; he had been on the point of reminding the peer that he had forgotten to give him the key of the cipher he had spoken of when the widow's ring at the door had driven him to a hurried retreat, but he had not considered the omission of any particular significance. His client would certainly discover it and either return to give him the key, or send it to the flat.

It would probably be some time before it was required for use here. In the meantime, thought Gimblet, he would have a look at it before locking it away in the safe.

He turned over the envelope. To his surprise, the flap was open and the glue had obviously never been moistened.

It was the work of an instant to look inside, but almost quicker came the conviction that it was useless to do so.

He was not mistaken.

The envelope was empty.

Gimblet stared at it for one moment in blank dismay. Then he strode to the door and shouted for Higgs.

"Did you notice," he asked him, "whether the envelope Lord Ashiel gave you for me was fastened, or was it open as this one is?"

"Oh no, sir," replied Higgs, "it was sealed up. There was a large patch of red sealing-wax at the back, with a coronet and some sort of little picture stamped on it. I can't say I looked at it particularly, but there may have been a lion or a dog, or some kind of animal. His lordship's arms, no doubt"

"You are quite certain about the sealing-wax?" Gimblet repeated slowly.

"Yes, sir, I am quite certain about that," answered Higgs; and he could not refrain from adding, "I put down the note on this little table, sir, as you told me."

"Thank you. That is all."

Gimblet's tone was as undisturbed as ever, but inwardly he was seething with anger and disgust; directed, however, entirely against himself.

When Higgs had departed he allowed himself the unusual, though quite inadequate relief of giving the chair on which his last visitor had sat a violent kick. After that he felt rather more ashamed of himself than before, if possible, and he sat down and raged at the simple way in which he had been fooled.

The widow had taken the envelope, of course. She must have snatched it up during the few seconds he had turned his back on her in order to step across the hall and retrieve her bag, and have replaced it at the same instant with this empty one which she had no doubt taken from his own writing-table while he stooped beside her to pick up her glove.

Gimblet fetched one of his own blue envelopes and compared it with the substitute. Yes, they were alike in every particular. The watermarks were the same and showed that she had used what she found ready to her hand.

It seemed, then, that the coup was not premeditated. But why, why, had he let her escape so easily? If only he had been a little quicker about following her, and had not wasted time looking for Higgs! She had had time to get clear away; and he, bungler that he was, had thought it of little consequence, and had afterwards stood poring over a catalogue in the hall, having decided that her morals were no business of his. Ass that he had been!

Who was she? Probably some one known to Lord Ashiel, or why should she have wanted his letter? Well, Ashiel must have met her on his way out, and would in that case at least be able to provide the information as to who she was. Still, more people might know Ashiel than Ashiel knew, and it was possible that that hope might fail. No doubt she was a member of the society the peer had so rashly entangled himself with in the days of his youth; one of those enemies of whom he had spoken with such grave apprehension. Had she followed him into the house and forced her way in

on a trumped-up pretext, on the chance of hearing or finding something that might be useful to her Nihilist friends, or had she known that Lord Ashiel intended to leave some document in Gimblet's keeping, and come with the idea, already formed, of stealing it? Such a plan seemed to partake too much of the nature of a forlorn hope to be likely, but whether or no she had expected to find that letter, Gimblet could hardly help admiring the rapidity with which she had possessed herself of it without wasting an unnecessary moment.

She must have been safe in the street and away with it, in less than five minutes from when she first saw it. Oh, she had been quick and dexterous! And he? He had been a gull, and false to his trust, and altogether contemptible. What should he say to Lord Ashiel? Why in the world hadn't he locked up the letter when Higgs brought it in? This was what came of making red-tape regulations about not being disturbed. After all, he comforted himself, she would be a good deal disappointed when she found what she had got. The key to a cipher; that was all. And a key with nothing to unlock was an unsatisfactory kind of loot to risk prison for. Evidently she expected something more important; perhaps the very documents she had invited Gimblet to steal for her, regardless of expense. This, he thought, was a reassuring sign for Lord Ashiel. For it was plain they meant to steal the papers, if they could; but not so plain that they looked to murder as the means by which to gain that end, since they applied for help from him.

Gimblet rang up the Carlton Club and asked for his client, but he was not in, nor did he succeed in communicating with him that afternoon; and when he rang up the Club for the fifth time after dinner he was told that Lord Ashiel had already left for Scotland.

With a groan, and fortifying himself with chocolates, the detective sat down to write a long and full account of his failure to keep what had been confided to his care, for the space of one hour.

In a couple of days he had an answer. Ashiel did not seem much perturbed at the loss of the cipher.

"It is a nuisance, of course," he said. "I must think out another, and will let you have it in a few days before sending you other things. No, I did not recognize the person I met as I was leaving your rooms. In spite of what you say as to your belief that theft and not murder is the object of these people, I am still convinced that my life is aimed at. However, I think that for the present I have hit on a way of frustrating their plans. With regard to the other problem you are helping me to solve, I am seeing a great deal of both the young people, and I believe there can be no doubt as to the identity of one of them, but I will write to you on this subject also in a few days' time."

He sent Gimblet a couple of brace of grouse, which the detective devoured with great satisfaction, and for the next week no more letters bearing a Scotch postmark were delivered at the Whitehall flat.

CHAPTER VI

"Here they come again."

Lord Ashiel spoke in a voice scarcely above a whisper, and Juliet crouched low against the peaty wall of the butt. There was an instant's silence, and then crack, crack, shots sounded from the other end of the line. Another minute and Lord Ashiel's gun went up; she heard the whirr of approaching wings before she covered both ears with her hands to deaden the noise of the explosions she knew were coming.

Then several guns seemed to go off at once. Bang! bang! bang! Bang! bang! bang!

Juliet did not really enjoy grouse-driving, but she tried to appear as if she did, since every one else seemed to, and at all events there were intervals between drives when she could be happy in the glory of the hills and the wild free air of the moors.

Meanwhile she knelt in her corner of the butt beside her host's big retriever, and waited. There was a little bunch of heather growing level with her nose, and she bent forward silently and sniffed at it. But the honey-sweet scent was drowned for the moment by the smell of gunpowder and dog.

Bang! bang! bang!

Presently Lord Ashiel turned and looked down at her, with a smile.

"The drivers are close up," he said. "The drive is over."

They went out of the butt, and she stood watching the dog picking up the birds Lord Ashiel had shot. He found nineteen, and the loader picked up three more. Juliet was glad her host shot so well. She thought him a wonderful man. And how kind he was to her. But she could not help looking over from time to time to the next butt, round which three other people were wandering: Sir David Southern, and his loader, and Miss Maisie Tarver, to whom he was engaged to be married.

One of Sir David's birds had fallen near his uncle's butt, and presently he strolled across to look for it, his eyes on the heather as he zigzagged about, leading his dog by the chain which his uncle insisted on his using.

"There is something here," called Juliet. "Yes, it is a dead grouse. Is this your bird?"

Sir David came up and took it.

"That's it," he said. "Thanks very much. How do you like this sort

of thing?"

He leant against the butt and looked down at her.

"Oh, it's so lovely here," began Juliet.

"But you don't like the shooting, eh?"

"I don't know," Juliet stammered. "I think it's rather cruel."

"You must remember there wouldn't be any grouse at all if they weren't shot," he said seriously, "and besides, wild birds don't die comfortably in their beds if they're not killed by man. A charge of shot is more merciful than a death from cold and starvation, or even from the attack of a hawk or any of a bird's other natural enemies. Just think. Wouldn't you rather have the violent end yourself than the slow, lingering one?"

"Yes," admitted Juliet, "I would. I believe you're right But I don't really much like seeing it happen, all the same."

"I think you'd get used to it; it's a matter of habit. I believe everything is a matter of habit, or almost everything. I suppose one gets used to any kind of horror in time."

He spoke reflectively; more, or so it seemed to Juliet, as if trying to convince himself than her; and as he finished speaking, she was conscious that his eyes, which had never left her face while they were talking, had done so now, and were fixed on some object or person behind her. She turned instinctively and saw Miss Maisie Tarver approaching, a brace of grouse swinging in each hand.

"I've got them all, right here, David," she informed him, as she came up. She was a tall dark girl, with the look of breeding which often proves so confusing to Europeans when they first come in contact with certain of her countrywomen. "This bird," she added, holding up one which still fluttered despairingly, "was a runner, but now he won't do any more running than the colour of my new pink shirt-waist; and that's guaranteed a fast tint, I guess."

Juliet looked away, trying not to show her dismay at the struggles of the wounded bird.

"Here, give me that bird, Maisie," said David rather abruptly. "I'll knock it on the head."

"Oh, I can do that, if it makes Miss Byrne feel badly," Maisie laughed.

Raising her small foot on to a stone, she began to make ineffectual attempts to beat the bird's head against her toe. David snatched it from her unceremoniously, and turned his back while he put an end to the poor creature's sufferings. His face was very red. When he had killed the bird he tossed it to Lord Ashiel's loader, and strode away across the heather.

Maisie looked at Juliet with a laugh.

"Your English young men are perfectly lovely," she remarked, "and David is just elegant, I think, or I'd not have gone and engaged myself to be led to the altar by him; but I can't kind of get used to the British way of looking at things. It's quite remarkable the manner you people have of admiring a girl one moment, because she's a good sport, and throwing fits of disapprobation the next, because she tries to act like she is one. Why, David looked at me just now as if he'd have taken less than two cents to put knock-out drops in my next cocktail."

"Oh," protested Juliet. "I'm sure he didn't mean to. I think his expression is naturally rather stern."

"Stern nothing," said Miss Tarver. "When I came up he was looking at you as if he reckoned he could eat you, shooting-stick and all. Oh, there aren't any flies on me! I know just what myself and dollars are worth to Sir David Southern, and I'm beginning to do some calculating on my own account as to what Sir David Southern is worth to me."

"Oh, surely you are wrong," cried Juliet. "I am certain Sir David has never thought about your money. Oh, I feel sure you misjudge him; and you mustn't talk like that, even in fun!"

"I don't know," said Miss Tarver doubtfully. "His cousin says David's really vurry attached to me, but it's the sort of thing one ought to be able to see for oneself, and I don't seem to feel a really strong conviction on the subject. As for his thinking of my dollars, I fail to see how he can help that when he's over head and ears in debt, the way he is. He told me so himself when he proposed. He put it as a business proposition. Said his ancient name was up for auction, and did I reckon it worth my while to make a bid, or words to that effect. There's a romantic love-story for you. He was the only titled man I'd ever struck up till a month ago, and I always did think it would be stunning to marry into an aristocratic British family, so I was pleased to death at the idea of putting his on its legs again with my dollars. What else could I do with them anyway? But I believe if I'd met your friend, Lord Ashiel, before I'd taken the fatal step, I'd have waited to see if he didn't fancy an Amurrican wife. But of course _he_ doesn't care a hill of beans whether I'm rich or not. He's got plenty himself, I'm told, and I guess he'd never have looked at me while you were around, any old way. All the same I call him a real striking-looking man."

"Oh, don't talk so loud," implored Juliet. "He'll hear you. He's quite close."

"Not he," said Miss Tarver. "He's back of the butt still. And I will say he is a real high-toned gentleman, and it's my opinion the girl who gets him will be able to give points to the man who took a piece of waste land for a bad debt, and struck the richest vein of gold in Colorado on it."

She looked at Juliet with an insinuating eye.

"Come along," said Lord Ashiel, as he strolled up to them with a bird he had been looking for, "we're going on now to the next drive," and they started off down the hillside, wading deep through the heather to the track.

Juliet had been nearly a week at Inverashiel. A week of wet weather which had sadly interfered with the shooting, but which had thrown the house party on its own resources and given her plenty of chances to get well acquainted with the other guests at the castle. They were most of them related to Lord Ashiel and already well known to each other. The American, David Southern's fiancée, the half Russian girl, Julia Romaninov, who had arrived on the same day as Juliet, and Juliet herself, were the only strangers. Mrs. Haviland, Lord Ashiel's sister, had been there when she arrived, but had left a day or two later as her husband, who was in the south, had fallen ill and needed her presence. Her place as hostess had been taken by Lady Ruth Worsfold, a distant cousin of the McConachans, who lived in a little house a mile down the loch, which was given her rent free by Lord Ashiel. Another cousin of his, Mrs. Clutsam, a young widow, he had also provided this year with a small house on the estate which was sometimes let to fishing tenants, and she, too, was at present staying at Inverashiel.

The guns consisted of Col. Spicer and Sir George Hatch, both well-known soldiers of between forty and fifty years of age, and Lord Ashiel's two nephews, David Southern, the son of a widowed sister, and Mark McConachan, whose father, now dead, had been Lord Ashiel's only brother. Both were tall, good-looking young men, though there was not even a family resemblance between the grey-eyed and fairhaired David, with his smooth-shaven face and slender well-proportioned figure, and his loose-limbed, rather ungainly cousin, whose appearance of great strength made up for his lack of grace, and whose large melting brown eyes made one forget the faults which the hypercritical might have found in the rest of his face: the rather large nose, and the mouth which was apt too often to be open except when it closed on the cigarette he was always smoking. He had been, so Juliet had heard some one say, one of the most popular men in the cavalry regiment he had lately left on account of its being ordered to India.

They were all very nice to Juliet, and she thought them all charming. Especially, she told herself with unnecessary emphasis, did she think Miss Maisie Tarver a delightful person; rather strange, possibly, to European ways and customs and manner of conversation, a very different type, certainly, from the new Lady Byrne--to whom Juliet was beginning to feel she had perhaps not hitherto sufficiently done justice--but open as the day, and with a heart of gold. She even went so far as to defend her to old Lady Ruth Worsfold, who had lamented one morning when David and his fiancée had gone out shooting together--for Miss Tarver, though not a good shot, was fond of ferreting rabbits--that the lad should be throwing himself away on this young lady from a provincial American town.

"I forget which, my dear, but it's something to do with chickens, I believe." They were sitting in the hall, and Lady Ruth looked up from her embroidery as she spoke, with an art interrogative glance towards Mrs.

Clutsam and Julia.

"Chicago," said Mrs. Clutsam, turning round from the table where she was writing. "That's where she comes from."

"Yes, that's it," said Lady Ruth; "the name had slipped my memory. It's the place where they all kill pigs, isn't it? I've read about it in Kipling. Her having been brought up to do that accounts for her passion for wounding rabbits, no doubt. I daresay one has to keep one's hand in. That reminds me, I will tell the cook not to send up sausages for breakfast. The poor girl is probably tired of the sight of them, though I suppose they mean money to her, which is always pleasant. When I had a poultry farm I used to feel my heart warm at the thought of poor dear Duncan's bald head. You know, my dear," she went on, turning to Juliet, "my husband had the misfortune to lose all his hair some years before he died, though really I don't believe there was a patent hair-wash he didn't try, till the house fairly reeked of them: but they never did any good, and he got to look more and more like one of my nice new-laid eggs; though not so brown of course, for I always kept Wyandots which lay the most beautiful dark brown ones, like _cafe au lait_"

"Well, the money will be very useful to poor David," said Mrs. Clutsam, without turning her head. She was rather annoyed because she had found that she had written "I am so glad you can kill pigs," instead of "I am so glad you can come" to some one she had invited to stay with her.

"There's plenty of money on this side of the duck pond, or whatever they call it," said Lady Ruth severely.

And it was then that Juliet had burst in.

"I am sure Sir David has never given a thought to Miss Tarver's money," she said.

"Why not, my dear?" said Lady Ruth, turning upon her mild, surprised eyes. "He is terribly badly off; it is his duty to marry money; but he needn't have gone so far for it."

"I don't believe he would marry for money. He would be above doing such a thing!" Juliet declared.

Julia, who had said nothing, stared at her, and laughed softly. She had a very low, musical laugh.

"I don't think you understand the position," said Mrs. Clutsam, turning round at last and laying down her pen with an air of resignation. "David Southern has inherited a lot of debts from his father, who only died last year, and he had piled up a good many on his own account before then, never suspecting that he would not be very well off. But he found the place mortgaged up to the hilt. There is really nothing between his mother and starvation, except her brother-in-law Ashiel's charity, and that is not pleasant for her because she has never been on good terms with him. It is very important that David should obtain money somehow,

for her sake more than for his own, and I'm sure he feels that deeply. He is devoted to her."

"But there are other ways of getting money than by marrying," Juliet objected.

"Yes, there are; but they are slow and uncertain, and David can't bear to see his mother poor. I am sure it was for her sake that he proposed to Miss Tarver."

"I think he would have tried some other way first, unless he had been in love with her," Juliet repeated, flushed and obstinate.

"Mr. McConachan says Sir David is very fond of Miss Tarver, really," said Julia, speaking for the first time. She spoke English fluently, but with a slight foreign accent. "He says his cousin is so reserved that he conceals his feelings as much as possible, but that, *au fond*, he adores her."

There was a short silence; Mrs. Clutsam seemed about to speak, but her eyes met those of Lady Ruth fixed on her with an expressionless gaze, and she turned round without a word and took up her discarded pen.

They were both thinking the same thing. If David concealed his feelings in the presence of Miss Tarver he was not so successful when he was in Juliet's neighbourhood. Both women had noticed the change that came over him when she was in the room. It was not that he did not try to appear indifferent; he did not talk to her, or seek her society. On the contrary he seemed to avoid it, and relapsed into silence at her approach. But both Lady Ruth and Mrs. Clutsam had caught him looking at her when he thought himself unobserved, and their observations had not left either of them in any doubt as to how the land lay.

Sir David Southern might be engaged to marry Miss Tarver, but he had fallen in love with some one quite different, and some one who was, moreover, or so they imagined, destined for quite another person.

For what was Miss Juliet Byrne doing at Inverashiel Castle?

This was a question which much exercised the minds of Lord Ashiel's relations and, when she was not present, formed the subject of many discussions.

Where had this girl, this extremely pretty and attractive girl, suddenly appeared from? Well, they all knew, of course, where she really had come from; but why? Why had Lord Ashiel suddenly sprung her on them like this? He had not even told Mrs. Haviland that he had invited her until the day before she arrived. Why this mystery? Where had he met her? How long had he known her? To a casual question Juliet had replied guardedly that she had not known him very long, but that he knew her family. Fervently did she hope that what she said was true.

One thing, however, seemed certain. No matter how, where, or why, Ashiel

had made friends with Juliet Byrne, he was bent on becoming even better acquainted. He appeared to be on excellent terms with her already, and every day saw them grow more familiar, and, on Ashiel's side, almost affectionate. If he went shooting or fishing Juliet must go too; to her he addressed his remarks; it was she whom he consulted when he made plans for the following days. His health was bad, he was subject to terrible headaches, and if she were not present he grew quickly nervous and irritable; when she was, he seldom took his eyes off her. He seemed to watch her, Mrs. Clutsam thought, with a certain expectancy; but also with a distinct and unmistakable pride. There was little doubt in the mind of anyone in the house that there would soon be a second Lady Ashiel.

As the party walked between the butts on that brilliant August day, Miss Tarver tacked herself on to her host and strode on ahead with him, keeping up a flow of interminable, drawling inanities, which made him wonder for the fortieth time what David could see in her.

The others tailed out after them, followed by dogs and loaders.

Without knowing how it came about, Juliet found herself walking beside David; and, as she was not used to the rough going on the hillside, they insensibly dropped behind the rest of the long, straggling procession. The way was uphill; Juliet panted and stumbled; and her companion seemed disinclined to talk.

They came to a burn, and he gave her his hand to cross from stone to stone. The burn was high, and one stone was under water, leaving a space too wide for Juliet to jump. David stepped on to the flooded rock, and turned to her.

"I will lift you over here," he said shortly. "Oh, I can wade quite well," said she. "My shoes are wet already."

But without more words he put his arms round her, and lifted her over. When he put her down he found his tongue.

"If Maisie stands with my uncle at the next drive," he said, "will you come to my butt?"

"I should like to," she said. For some reason his tone made her breath come quickly.

David stood looking down at her as though considering.

"I can't go back on my word," he said at last inconsequently. "I shall have to marry her, if she wants it, I suppose. But I can't bear you to think that I care for her. I've got to think of other people."

"You mustn't say that!" she cried. "Oh, you mustn't say that to me!"

"Why not?" he said, looking at her strangely. "What have I said that isn't right?"

"Nothing, I suppose," Juliet faltered. "But--but--Oh," she cried, "if you don't care for her, you must tell her so, and she will break it off. Anything would be better than to go on with it!"

"I think she knows," he answered gloomily. "She won't break it off, because she wants to be 'my Lady,' It's a business matter, really. And I'd have to stick to it for my mother's sake, anyhow."

Juliet could think of nothing to say. "You ought not to marry her," she stammered again.

"If I didn't," he began hoarsely--"if she did let me go, I don't suppose you'd ever care for me enough to marry me? Oh, I know I ought not to say it," he broke off; "I'm a cad to speak like this. Forgive me, Juliet."

Juliet's world revolved around her at an unusual pace for the space of a second. She shut her eyes to steady herself; a mixture of misery and happiness deprived her of speech or movement. Gradually the misery predominated and she burst into tears.

"Forgive me, forgive me," he was saying. He stood before her, looking as wretched as a man can look.

"Yes, yes," she sobbed. "Let us forget all about it. You must forget me."

"You know I can't," he said. "Juliet, Juliet, don't cry. If you cry I shall be simply obliged to kiss you." And he took a step towards her.

They were still standing at the edge of the burn, screened from the track ahead, partly by a little bush of alder which grew beside them, partly by the winding of the path round the slope of the hill. As David spoke a rabbit came scampering up to the other side of the bush, and then, becoming aware of their proximity, turned at right angles and darted down the bank. It was three or four yards away, and going hard, when there was a loud report, and the branches of the alder cracked and rattled. Several little boughs fell to the ground a foot or two away from the spot on which Juliet stood. Surprise dried her tears and restored David to his senses.

"Hi!" he shouted, bounding on to the path, and waving his arms frantically. "What are you shooting at? Look out, can't you?"

Fifty yards up the track his Cousin Mark was standing, an open gun in his hand; a scared ghillie was running towards them down the path beyond.

"Good heavens, David," Mark ejaculated, "do you mean to say you were in the burn? I thought you were on ahead! Why in the world did you lag behind like that? Do you know I might easily have shot you?"

"Do I know it? You precious near did shoot me, and Miss Byrne, too, I tell you. If it hadn't been for that alder we should have been bound to get most of the charge between us. It's not like you to be so careless."

"I'm frightfully sorry, old man," said Mark, coming up; "it was careless of me, but I felt sure there was no one back there. I saw that rabbit and stalked it, meaning to overtake you all afterwards. They walk so fearfully slow, you know, what with all these ladies, and Uncle Douglas not feeling very fit. And Miss Byrne here, too! By Jove, I _am_ sorry! Beastly stupid of me."

He was plainly agitated, and could hardly blame himself severely enough. And David, for his part, was not disposed to make light of what had happened. Perhaps he was glad of a subject on which he could enlarge.

"It was a rotten shot, too," he mumbled, as they all hurried on after the others. "You were about four yards behind that rabbit."

"Absolutely rotten," agreed Mark. "I don't know what's happened to my shooting. I've hit every bird in the tail to-day, except when I've missed 'em clean, and that's what I've done most of the time. There's something wrong with my eye altogether. If I don't get better, I shall knock off shooting--for a few days, anyhow."

All his usual self-possession seemed to have been shaken out of him by the thought of the catastrophe he might have caused. Young, good-looking and popular, he was accustomed to take the pleasure shown in his society and the admiring approval of his associates, which had always contributed so much to his comfortable feeling of satisfaction with himself, and which had invariably strengthened his reluctance to harbour unpleasant doubts as to his own perfections, as a matter of course; and the heartiness with which he now cursed himself for a careless and dangerous fool testified to the fright he had had.

Even when David, relenting a little, though still reluctant to show it, grunted surlily, "None of you cavalry soldiers are safe with a gun." Mark did not, as he would generally have done, deny the accusation resentfully, but displayed an astonishing meekness, which proved how clearly he saw himself to be in the wrong. Juliet, who had sometimes thought him rather selfish--a fault he shared with many others of his kind, and one perhaps almost unavoidable in attractive only sons--was touched by his unusual humility, and treated the matter lightly, doing all she could to cheer him up and restore to him his good opinion of himself.

But Mark, while he smiled back gratefully in reply, would not allow her to persuade him that he was less to blame than he asserted, and he was still lamenting his carelessness when they came up with the rest of the party, who were already stationed in the butts.

Miss Tarver was beside Lord Ashiel, and Mark stopped a minute to relate how nearly he had been the cause of an accident, although both David and Juliet, by mutual consent, guessed what he was going to do, and tried to dissuade him.

"No need to say anything about it," David mumbled in his ear.

"No, no, don't, please," Juliet murmured in the other.

Yet he would not be tempted, and they walked on together in silence, leaving him to tell the story.

"I as near as makes no difference peppered David and Miss Byrne just now," they heard him begin, and then Lord Ashiel's voice broke in in an angry tone as they passed out of earshot.

David's loader reported afterwards that that young gentleman and Miss Byrne, when she waited with him in the butt, seemed to find very little to talk about. And it was a long wait before any birds came up, on that beat.

CHAPTER VII

It was a few days after this that Gimblet, taking up an evening paper at the Club, was startled to see a sinister headline of "Murder," immediately followed by the name of Ashiel.

"MURDER OF A SCOTCH PEER."
"LORD ASHIEL SHOT DEAD IN HIS OWN HOUSE."
"ESCAPE OF MURDERER."

"They've got him," he muttered between his teeth as he hastily began to read the paragraph that followed:

"News reaches us, as we go to press, of a dastardly crime, involving the death of Lord Ashiel, which occurred late last night at his residence in the Highlands of Scotland. Lord Ashiel was sitting quietly in his library at Inverashiel Castle, when a shot was fired through the window by someone in the grounds, which wounded his Lordship so severely that death took place instantaneously. Although the household was immediately alarmed and a thorough search made through the garden and grounds surrounding the castle, the murderer contrived to escape. The police are continuing their search in the neighbourhood, and it is believed that a very strong clue to the scoundrel has been discovered. Douglas, Lord Ashiel, was the seventh Baron. He was born in 1869, educated at Eton and Oxford, and served for some years in the Diplomatic Service. He was a widower and childless, and is succeeded in the title by his nephew, Mr. Mark McConachan."

There was nothing more.

Gimblet strode out of the Club and drove to New Scotland Yard. The Superintendent of the Criminal Investigation Department was in, and received him gladly. Gimblet held out the paper he had carried off from the Club and pointed to the news of the tragedy.

"Is all this correct?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, indeed," replied Mr. Beech, the superintendent. "We heard of it this morning. The Glasgow people have sent their men up, but it will take them all day to get to the place. Inverashiel is on the West Coast, and not what one would call easy to get at. They ought to be there about five o'clock."

"Who has gone?" asked Gimblet.

"Macross has gone himself with one or two others. He has taken a photographer and a finger-print man, and will get to work as soon as he possibly can. This is a big business. Lord Ashiel is an important person; apart from his being a Scotch landowner--he owns 90,000 acres of moorland there--he is connected with half the great families in England. He has a cousin in the Cabinet; cousins everywhere, in the Foreign Office, in Parliament, in trade; he has one who owns a newspaper. He is rich; he is a sleeping partner in some Newcastle iron works, he is part owner of a small colliery in Yorkshire. Oh, there's going to be a fine to-do about this case, you bet your life!"

"I knew him," said Gimblet slowly. "He came to see me a fortnight ago. He told me he expected an attempt might be made to kill him."

"The deuce he did!" exclaimed Beech. "Did he say who it was he feared?"

"Not exactly; but I gathered he had mixed himself up with some secret society abroad. He refused to give me any explicit information, or to appeal to you for protection, as I advised him to do. He told me he had some document in his possession which his enemies were anxious to obtain from him, and that if they failed to do so by peaceful methods he thought it likely they might try to get him out of the way; though he added that he did not anticipate any open assault, but thought it likely he might die some death that should have all the appearances of being accidental. He made me promise to take up the case if this should happen."

"We are always glad of your help, my dear fellow," said Beech.

"He gave me certain instructions, in the event of my being able to satisfy myself that his death is the work of his Nihilist friends," said Gimblet, who thought it unnecessary to mention his disconcerting experience with the veiled lady, "And contrariwise, if I can make sure that they have no hand in it, it was his wish that I should then leave the whole thing alone. So I had better see what I can make of it before I go into this any further with you."

"I can't say I agree with that idea," protested the superintendent.

"However, I know you insist on working on your own lines, and that I have really no influence with you, in spite of the show you make, humbug that you are! of consulting my opinion. Well, good luck go with you; and let me know if you hit on anything that escapes our men."

Gimblet walked back to his flat, his mind full of the tragedy which he had an uneasy feeling he might, in some way, have averted. How, he hardly knew. Lord Ashiel could not have lived all his life encircled by a cordon of police and detectives; and, without such precautions, a man condemned by Nihilist societies is practically sure to fall a victim to their excellent organization and disregard for the lives of their own members.

Still Gimblet had liked the dead peer, and could not get the pale aristocratic face and tired, feverish blue eyes out of his head. Surely he might have found some way of preventing this catastrophe.

He found a telegram at his flat. It was signed Byrne, and ran:

"Please come immediately to investigate death of Lord Ashiel certain some mistake."

It had been sent off at four o'clock that day.

"Higgs," called Gimblet to his servant, as he filled up the prepaid reply form, "I am going North to-night, by the eight o'clock from Euston. Pack me things for a week; country clothes; and put in plenty of chocolate."

He collected several things he wanted packed, and then retired to his sitting-room, where he buried himself in an enormous file of typewritten papers he had borrowed from Scotland Yard, and which related to the various Nihilists known to be living in England. He had to return them before he left London, and when he dropped them at the Yard about seven o'clock, on his way to the station, he learnt that no word had yet come from the Scotch authorities as to any further developments at Inverashiel.

A few minutes past eight he was travelling North as fast as the Scotch express could carry him.

It was midday on the following day when he got off the steamer that had brought him from Crianan, and landed with his luggage on the wooden pier which displayed, painted on a rough board, the name of Inverashiel.

One of the deck hands dumped his luggage out on to the side of the loch and the boat moved on again.

A track led across the moor, and down it Gimblet saw a farm cart advancing, driven by a man who shouted as he approached:

"The young leddy's comin' doon tae meet ye, sir."

And behind him, on the near skyline, the detective beheld the hurrying figure of a girl.

Leaving the man with the cart to grapple with his luggage, which was not of large dimensions, Gimblet walked to meet Juliet. As they drew near, she stopped and held out her hand.

"Mr. Gimblet?" she asked.

"Yes," he said; "and you are Miss Byrne, are you not?"

He looked at her keenly as he spoke, noticing that her eyes were red and swollen, and that her whole bearing was eloquent of sorrow and want of sleep. She lifted a miserable face to him.

"Yes," she said. "I am so glad you have come, but it has seemed a long while. I suppose you couldn't get here before. Do you know all that has happened?"

"I know that Lord Ashiel is dead," said the detective. "Hardly more than that. Will you tell me all there is to tell before we go up to the castle?"

"I have left the castle, and am staying with Lady Ruth Worsfold, whose house you can just see through the trees," she said. "Will you come there first, or shall we go straight to the castle. It is about a mile through the woods."

"Let us walk straight up," said Gimblet. "You can tell me as we go. I have, as you say, been a long while getting here, but it is fortunate that the day is fine. I hope it has not rained during the last thirty-six hours?"

"I don't know," said the girl. "No; I believe it has been fine. But I haven't taken much notice what the weather has been like." She was disappointed and indignant that he should talk in this trivial strain, when her own heart was nearly bursting, and her every nerve stretched and tingling. She had pinned all her hopes on the arrival of the famous detective.

Gimblet heard the change in her tone.

"You think I am talking platitudes about the weather," he said quickly, "and you think I am unsympathetic for your distress; but, believe me, what I said is very much to the point. If it has not rained the murderer's footmarks will be very much more easily seen, and that is very important."

"You don't know," said Juliet in a voice that trembled ominously. "They have found plenty of footmarks. The Glasgow detectives said they were Sir--Sir David Southern's. They found his gun too, not cleaned; and they say he did it, and they have taken him away, to--to prison." A sob escaped her, but she controlled herself with a great effort and went on: "You must prove that he didn't do it. I know he didn't. Anyone who knew him must know he didn't. Oh you must, you must, find the real murderer!"

Gimblet was silent for a moment before this appeal. It was difficult to know what to say. He knew Macross well for a cautious, intelligent officer; if he had arrested Sir David Southern it seemed pretty certain that there was good evidence against that gentleman. On the other hand

Lord Ashiel had seemed to think it likely that his death might wear an appearance calculated to mislead. Still Gimblet had a deep-rooted prejudice against holding out hopes he could not see a good chance of fulfilling, and he had so often been appealed to by distracted women to save their friend and "find the real murderer."

"Will you not begin at the beginning?" he said at last. "I know how you came to be staying at Inverashiel, but I know nothing of what has happened since your arrival, except the bare fact of Lord Ashiel's death. Tell me every detail you can think of, but, first, who else was staying at the castle besides yourself? I suppose they have left now?"

"Yes, they have all gone," said Juliet. "The men went before it all happened, and the others the next day. There were Lady Ruth Worsfold and Mrs. Clutsam; they are both cousins of Lord Ashiel's, and he lends them little houses that belong to him near here, but they were staying at the castle for a week or two. Then there was Miss Julia Romaninov. She is half a Russian, and Lord Ashiel's sister, who is away just now, had invited her. An American girl, Miss Tarver, a great heiress, was there too. The men were Sir George Hatch and Colonel Spicer, who are cousins of Lord Ashiel's; and Mr. Mark McConachan and Sir David Southern, who are his nephews, Mr. McConachan being the son of his dead brother, while Sir David is his younger sister's child.

"I have been here a fortnight. The time has gone quickly. Every one was very nice to me; and, though nothing out of the way happened, it was all new and delightful, and I enjoyed it very much. Lord Ashiel, especially, was kindness itself; he was never tired of explaining to me the customs and traditions of the countryside, and he spared no pains to see that I was amused and entertained. I was with him most of the time, and grew to know him very well. I thought him a wonderful man: so clever, so widely read, so tolerant and sympathetic in his opinions. He was terribly delicate, though; he had continual headaches, and was so easily tired; but he told me it was a new thing for him to feel ill; up till a year or so ago he had always had the best of health. Mrs. Clutsam told me she thought he had been terribly worried over something; she didn't know what it was; and of course it is not so very long since his wife and child died. But he did not strike me as being troubled about anything; his eyes had a sad expression, and sometimes he looked at me in a wondering sort of way; but I never saw him appear worried, and he was always cheerful and lively while I was with him."

"Was he not equally so with the rest of the party?" asked Gimblet. "Did he show his likes and dislikes plainly?"

"I am afraid he did, rather. I think feeling ill and tired made him irritable, and his temper was very quick. But he was always nice to me."

"Who wasn't he nice too?"

"Well, I don't think he liked Miss Romaninov much, In fact, she seemed to get on his nerves, and sometimes he was so rude to her that I used to wonder that she stayed. But she is such a quiet, good-tempered little

thing; she never seems to mind anything, and she was really sorry and upset when he died. And he didn't much like the other girl, Miss Tarver, but he made an effort, I think, to bear with her for his nephew's sake. He said to me how glad he was that the boy would be well provided for."

"Which nephew?" asked Gimblet. "I don't understand. What had Miss Tarver to do with it?"

"Sir David Southern was engaged to marry her. She has thrown him over now," said Juliet, and in spite of herself there was a trace of elation in her voice. "As soon as Sir David was suspected of the murder she broke off the engagement."

"Ah," said Gimblet, stooping to pick a piece of bracken, and waving it before him to keep at bay the flies, which were buzzing round them in clouds. He offered another bit silently to his companion, and she took it absently, without a word.

"He seemed very fond of Mr. McConachan," she said, "and I think he liked every one else as well. Yes, I am sure he did, though he did have a dreadful quarrel with Sir David two days before he was killed; and he was angry with him once before that."

"Ah," said Gimblet again. "How was that?"

"The first time it was my fault, or partly my fault," Juliet went on. "It was out shooting, and I couldn't go as fast as the others, so I lagged behind and nearly got shot by accident, as Mr. McConachan thought we were in front of him. Sir David was with me, and Lord Ashiel was fearfully angry with him, and said he'd no business to let me get in a place where I might have been killed. He was rather cross with him for the next few days, though I told him it was my fault; and then the other day, when Sir David annoyed him again, there was a frightful row."

"Was that your fault too?" asked Gimblet with a smile.

"No, it really wasn't. Sir David had a dog, a retriever, to which he was devoted, but which Lord Ashiel hated. It was not a well-trained dog, I must admit, and it used to pay very little attention to its master, except at meal times, when it became very affectionate, not only to him, but to every one. The truth is that he spoilt it, and never punished it when it did wrong, or took any trouble to make it behave better. I heard that before I arrived there was trouble about it, as it did a lot of damage in the garden, trampling down the flower-beds, and knocking Lord Ashiel's favourite plants to pieces--he was very fond of gardening--and the very first day they went out shooting it ran away for miles, and Sir David after it, which delayed one of the drives half an hour. His uncle had been very cross about that, they said, and told Sir David he must keep it on a chain; but the next day it ate a grouse it was supposed to be retrieving, and Lord Ashiel was furious, and said that if it did anything more of the kind he'd have it killed.

"However, after that, all went well. The dog was kept tightly chained,

and nothing happened till the other day. We were all out on the moors, waiting in the butts for the last drive to begin. Everything had gone badly with the shooting that day; the birds all went the wrong way; there were hardly enough guns for driving, anyhow; there was a high wind, and the shooting had been shocking; no one had shot well except Mr. McConachan, who is such a good shot; every one had been wounding their birds, and that always annoyed Lord Ashiel. He was in a very bad temper, and though he was not cross with me, I was rather afraid he might be, so I went and stood with Sir David. Miss Tarver was watching Sir George Hatch in the next butt, and then came Colonel Spicer, with Mr. McConachan and Lord Ashiel right at the end of the line.

"We had been waiting some time, when Sir David whispered to me that the birds were coming, and crouched down under the wall of the butt. His loader was kneeling behind him ready to hand him his second gun, with two cartridges stuck between his fingers to reload the first one. We were all intent on the grouse, and no one noticed that that wretched dog had worked his head out of his collar and was roaming about behind us. Just at that moment a mountain hare came lolloping along the crest of the hill, and, deceived by the stillness, came to a pause just opposite us and sat up on its hind legs to brush its whiskers with its paw. Its toilette didn't last long, however, for by that time the dog had caught its wind, and with a series of yelps had hurled itself upon it. The hare was off in a second, and away they went, straight down the line, the dog making as much noise as a whole pack of hounds as he bounded and leapt over the thick heather. Sir David started up with an exclamation of dismay, and I, too, stood up and looked over the top of the butt. Following the direction of his eyes, I saw clouds of grouse streaming away to the left, all turning as they came over the hill, and wheeling away from us towards the north.

"The drive was absolutely spoilt. The hare and its pursuer had by this time gone the whole length of the butts, and looked like going till Christmas. Lord Ashiel had come out into the open, and we saw him put his gun to his shoulder. The dog gave one last leap, and rolled over before the report reached our ears. It was a quarter of a mile away from us."

Juliet paused; she was out of breath; they had been walking fast and were within sight of the castle gates. The way led along the side of Loch Ashiel, and the castle rose in front of them on a tall rocky promontory, which jutted far into the water.

"Let us rest here a few minutes," said Gimblet. "It is too much to ask you to talk while we are walking up that hill, and I don't want you to leave out any details, however unimportant they may appear to you."

CHAPTER VIII

They had reached a place where a wide horseshoe of beach ran down to the

loch. For more than a week there had been no rain to speak of. The season as a whole had been dry, and the water was very low; tufts of grass dotted the shore; brambles and young alders were springing up bravely, determined to make the most of their time. At the back stretched a meadow, part of which had been cut for hay; the rest of it was so full of weeds and wild flowers, ragweed, burdock and the red stalks of sorrel, that it had been left untouched, and filled the foreground with colour. The grass had gone to seed and turned a rich reddish purple; beneath it grew wild geraniums whose leaves were already scarlet. Bluebells and scabious made a haze of mauve, and everywhere the warm, sandy stalks of the dried grasses shone yellow through the patch.

They sat down at the edge of the beach and leant back against the overhanging turf. Opposite to them the little town of Crianan clung to the steep rocks below Ben Ghusy, the houses looking as if they stood piled one on top of another in a rough pyramid; and the whole surmounted by the high walls and tower of the Roman Catholic monastery which dominated the scene, and always seemed to Juliet to wear a look of stern defiance, as if it were offering a challenge to that other fortress that frowned back at it. She could imagine the monks in the old days, standing on its parapet and daring the Lords of Inverashiel to do their worst. Far away down the loch lay the hills, scarce more deeply grey than the water; beyond them more distant tops melted into the sky. The grey ripples lapped gently on jagged shingle, and a persistent housefly buzzed loudly round their heads; at that hour there were as yet few midges, and it was very peaceful, very solitary, very desolate.

"I don't know," said Juliet, going on with her story where she had left off, "which was more angry, Lord Ashiel or Sir David. After the first few minutes, in which they both said things I am sure they regretted afterwards, neither of them would speak to the other, and it was a very uncomfortable evening for every one. The next day was better. Colonel Spicer and Sir George left by the morning train, both going on to shoot in other parts of Scotland. Mrs. Clutsam went away too; she had some one coming to stay with her at her own house near by. Both the young men went stalking on different parts of the forest, and Lord Ashiel and I, with the two other girls, spent the morning on the loch trolling for salmon; but we didn't get a rise.

"In the afternoon I walked up the river with Julia Romaninov; we talked about our schooldays. She had been at school in Germany, and I in Switzerland. After a while she got tired and went home, but I went on by myself, for I had a lot of things to think of, and was glad to be alone. I came at last to a great pool among the rocks, where the river comes down in a fall from far above in a cloud of spray and foam. I stood on a stone at the water's edge and watched the trout rising in the pool. The river was low and the water very clear. Standing on the rocks above it, it seemed as if I could see every pebble at the bottom, except where they were hidden in the ripples which spread away from beneath the fall. The pool is like the bottom of a well; high rocks rear themselves round it to a great height; they are veiled in a greenness of fern and moss, and near the top many trees have found a roothold in the crevices and bend forward towards each other over the water, as divers poise themselves before

leaping down. Through a narrow opening opposite the fall the river makes its way onward. As I stood there a stone must have come down from the heights above. I did not see it, and the noise of the waterfall deadened any sound of its descent, but suddenly I felt a heavy blow between the shoulders, and I must have tumbled forward into the pool below.

"The next thing I remember was looking up into the anxious friendly face of Andrew Campbell, one of the ghillies at Inverashiel. It seemed to be hanging above me in the sky, which was the only other thing I could see, and I wondered vaguely why I saw it upside down. My head was aching cruelly and I couldn't imagine what was the matter, though I was too weak and faint to care. To cut my adventure short, Andrew had come to a pool lower down the river just as I floated into it on top of the current; he had fished me out, and was now restoring me to life again. I was got back to the house, how I hardly know, put to bed, and actually wept over by Lord Ashiel. By the evening I had so far recovered that I was able to come down to dinner, though I should not have done so if it had not been for the anxiety of my host, as my head still felt as if it was going to split. I received many congratulations on my escape, and Lord Ashiel, when he spoke of it, was so much moved that every one was quite embarrassed, and I myself was touched beyond expression at the affection he did not attempt to conceal. He was very silent after that, but in spite of him dinner that night was a merry meal. Every one was in the best of spirits, or else assumed them for the time being. We all joked and laughed over my adventure, and Mr. McConachan said I bore a charmed life, since I had escaped being killed by his careless shot, and now the river refused to drown me. It was not till the servants had left the room, and we were preparing to do the same, that Lord Ashiel spoke again.

"Lady Ruth had got up, and was moving towards the door, and the other girls and I were following her, when he called her back. 'Will you wait a minute, Ruth,' he said. 'I have something to tell you and my young friends here.' He smiled round at all of us, including Sir David, to whom he hadn't spoken since the affair of the dog. 'I have some good news which I want you to share with me.' He took me by the hand and drew me forward. 'I want,' said he, 'to introduce you all to a young lady whom you do not know. This is Juliet McConachan, my dear and only daughter.'

"I was not really so surprised as he expected. His behaviour to me had made me suspicious, and during the last few days especially I had allowed myself to nourish a hope that we were related. But I was glad. I can't tell you how glad and thankful. Every one else was tremendously surprised. They all clustered round us with questions and exclamations, but Lord Ashiel would say no more just then, and only smiled and beamed, and nodded mysteriously. 'I am not going to answer any questions till I have had a talk with Juliet,' he said. 'This is as much news to her as it is to any of you, and it is only fair that she should be the first to hear the story. For I won't deny that there is a story. Come to me presently, my child,' he went on, addressing himself to me. 'Come to the library in half an hour's time. You will find me there, and I will tell you all about it.'

"I went to the drawing-room, my aching head almost forgotten. I was, of

course, intensely excited; indeed I think I scarcely took in any of the kind things that Lady Ruth and the others said to me that evening; at all events I have hardly any idea what they were, and none at all as to what I answered. My one overmastering desire was to be alone; to have time to think; to realize all that the news meant to me; and after a quarter of an hour had passed I made some excuse, and left the room. The nearest way to my bedroom was by a back stair, and to reach it I had to pass through a passage leading to the gun-room. The door of that room was ajar, and as I went by Sir David Southern came out.

"What have you been doing in there at this time of night?" I asked; and oh, Mr. Gimblet, I was so foolish as to repeat this to the Glasgow detective when he questioned me. To think that my careless words have led them to believe Sir David capable of such a crime! But I had no idea of the meaning they would attach to it. You will understand presently how it was. 'I went to clean my rifle,' he answered, shutting the door behind him. 'I always see to that myself. And where are you off to so fast, Cousin Juliet? That is what you are to me, it appears.' And so we talked: about me, and our newly discovered relationship. I need not repeat all that, need I? And, besides, I do not remember everything we said," added Juliet, flushing.

"After a little while, though, I told him how badly my head ached, and he was very sympathetic about it. 'You ought not to have come down to dinner,' he said, 'the dining-room gets so hot and stuffy; it is a low room, and Uncle Douglas never will have the window open, even on a lovely night like this.' There is a door at the foot of the stairs, opposite the gun-room, and as he spoke he drew back the bolt. 'Come out into the garden for a few minutes,' he said, holding the door open for me to pass, 'a little fresh air will do you more good than anything.'

"The night was warm, I suppose, for Scotland, but cool enough to seem wonderfully fresh and invigorating after the enclosed air within the house. It was very dark, and the sky was overcast, though just above us a star or two was shining, very large and clear. Otherwise I could hardly distinguish anything at all, except the line, about fifty yards away, where the lawn came to an end, and the ground dipped abruptly down towards the loch, so that the level edge of the grass showed up against the less opaque darkness of the sky, like a black velvet border to a piece of black silk.

"We stood there a little while, till I remembered I must go to the library. My head was already much better when I turned back into the house; Sir David didn't follow me; he seemed to be staring through the gloom in front of him. 'I am going in,' I said. 'What are you looking at?' 'I thought I saw something move over there on the skyline,' he replied; 'do you see anything?' I looked, but could make out nothing. 'Well,' he said, 'if you are going in, I think I'll just go over and see if there's anyone about; you might leave the door open, will you?'

"And so I left him, and made my way to the library. As I passed through the billiard-room, Mr. McConachan, who was knocking the balls about, asked me if I had seen his cousin, and I told him Sir David was outside

on the lawn by the gun-room door.

"Lord Ashiel--my father--was waiting for me, and he came to meet me and kissed me tenderly. We were both very much agitated: I was still feeling the effects of my escape from drowning, and he, poor dear, was weak and ill. In short, neither of us was in a fit state to meet the situation calmly; and, if my tears flowed, they were not the only ones that were shed. For a few moments we cried like babies, in each other's arms, and then I pulled myself together, for I knew how bad it was for his health to get into this nervous state. Mr. Gimblet, I needn't tell you all the conversation that followed between us. He told me that you know the whole story, that you are the one person in the world in whom he had confided; so it is unnecessary for me to repeat what he said of his marriage to my mother, of her death, and of his resolve never willingly to look upon me, the baby who had taken her from him. He told me also of the years that had intervened between that day when he had shuffled off his responsibilities on to Mrs. Meredith, and the day, not long ago, when he at last decided to hunt out his daughter.

"He told me of his fears that she should prove to be none other than Julia Romaninov, and of how, in desperation, he had applied to you for help, and of how you had discovered my existence.

"He said he had never really doubted from the moment he first set eyes on me that I was Juliana's child. But he dared not hint such a thing to me till he was certain, and anxious though he was to see a likeness between me and her, or himself, he had not been able to tell himself, truthfully, that he could really see one, until that day. It was when I was brought home that afternoon, so white and faint, so changed by my pallor from what he chose to describe as my usual gay brilliance, that the resemblance suddenly showed itself. He hardly knew that it was I; it might have been Juliana that they were carrying. He said there could be no doubt that I was her daughter; that he for one, required no further proof; though we should probably get it now it was no longer wanted. Sir Arthur Byrne might be able to suggest some way of tracing things. Not that it mattered, for he could not in any case leave me his title, and, on the other hand, he had full control of his money, which would be mine before very long.

"I cried out at that, that he must not say so; that it was not money I wanted, but a father, affection, friendship. He repeated that all the same I should have it in course of time. That it was all settled already. Even before he was certain that I was his own child, he liked me well enough to make up his mind about that. He asked me if I remembered that he had stayed at home the other day while the rest of us were on the hill? He said he had made his will that day, and I was the principal legatee, though he had not alluded to me in it by my own name. But he worded it carefully, so that that should make no difference; and though he believed it was quite clear as it was, he would make it over again, as soon as he could obtain legal proof of my birth.

"I supposed I murmured some sort of thanks for his care of my future, and he went on again, saying that he only wished the title could come to me

too, when he died; but that it would go to Mark, since the little boy his second wife had given him was dead, and I was a girl.

"He said he was afraid that Mark might be a little disappointed, for, if he hadn't found me, Mark and David would have shared his fortune between them; but they would soon get over it, for they were good lads, especially Mark; and David would have plenty of money through this very satisfactory marriage of his. I couldn't help interrupting that money wasn't everything. I am telling you all these trivial things, Mr. Gimblet, because you said I was to try and remember everything, however unimportant."

"Yes," said Gimblet, "that is what I want. Pray go on."

"He only smiled when I said that," Juliet resumed, "and said that different opinions were held on that subject by different people. Then he went on talking about my future life, and said again how glad he would always be that he had consulted you, and how grateful he was for what you had done for him, and that if any trouble cropped up, I was to be sure and send for you at once. He looked to you to protect my interests, and, if necessary, to avenge his death.

"I couldn't think what he meant, and said so; but he only smiled again and said he hoped there would be no need for it. He said he had some papers he must send to you to take care of, some papers that were rather dangerous to their owner, he was afraid, though at the same time they were a safeguard to him. But he shouldn't like me to have anything to do with them, or the boys either, and he must get them away from Inverashiel as soon as he could. In the meantime they were in a safe place where no one would find them, and he would write to you that night and tell you how to look for them, just on the chance that something should happen before he could send them off. His will was with them, too, for the present, but he would send that up to Findlay & Ince. He wouldn't tell me where the papers were; he didn't want me to have anything to do with these tiresome things.

"He said all this with hesitation; with long pauses between the sentences. It seemed to me that he would have liked to tell me more, and I didn't know what to say. Indeed, he seemed to be talking rather to himself than to me, and I am not sure if he heard me when I said that if he had any anxiety I should like to share it, if it were possible. Presently he seemed to take a sudden resolution. He said that there was no reason, at all events, why he should not explain to me how to find the papers. He had written directions in cipher once before and given you the key, but you had lost it, and might do so again. It would be just as well that I should know about it too, in any case. He had had to think out a new method, and at present it was known to no one except himself, which was perhaps not very wise. However, he would send it to you that night, and would explain it to me at once. But first I must promise him, very faithfully, never to mention it to anyone, whatever happened, not to let anyone, except you, ever guess that there was such a thing in existence.

"I promised solemnly; still he hardly seemed satisfied, and looked at me

very searchingly, while he said he wondered if I were old enough to understand the importance of this, and if I realized that I was promising not to tell my nearest or dearest; not my adopted father, Sir Arthur Byrne, nor my lover, if I had one. That it was a matter of life and death, that his life was in danger then, and that I would inherit the risk unless I did as he said.

"Rather indignant, though completely mystified, I promised again. He seemed satisfied, and said he would write the whole thing down for me. He moved from the hearth, where we had been sitting, to the writing-table, which stands in the middle of the room, in front of the window. He sat down at it, and I stood a little behind him, looking on as he took a sheet of notepaper and turned over the pens in the tray in search of a pencil. The room was very hot; the tufts of peat smouldering in the grate, and the two lamps, combined with the fumes of Lord Ashiel's cigar to render the atmosphere oppressive to a person with a violent headache. I glanced longingly towards the window. It was not entirely hidden by the heavy curtains which were drawn across it, for they did not quite meet in the middle, and I could see perfectly well that the window was shut. For a moment I hesitated, torn between the desire for fresh air and the fear that my father might feel too cold. He was terribly chilly. I decided to ask him, and turned to him again as he took up the pencil and examined the point critically.

"'Would you mind,' I was beginning; but at that instant a loud report sounded just outside the window. Lord Ashiel fell forward on to the table with a low cry, his hand clasped to his ribs. 'Oh, what is it?' I cried, bending over him; 'you are hurt; you are shot! Oh, what shall I do!' He was making a great effort to speak, I could see that plainly enough; but no words would come, and he seemed to be choking. At last he managed to get out a few words. 'Gimblet,' he gasped, 'the clock--eleven--steps--' and then with a groan his hand dropped from his side, his head rolled back upon the table, and a silence followed, more horrible to me than anything that had gone before.

"I saw now that his shirt was already soaked with blood; and, as in terror I called again upon his name, the dreadful truth was borne in upon me, and I knew that he was dead."

Juliet's voice failed her; she spoke the last few words in a quavering whisper, and if Gimblet had looked at her at that moment he would have beheld a countenance drawn and distorted by horror.

But he was very much occupied, and did not look up. With a notebook open on his knee, he was busily writing down what she had said.

"You are sure of the words?" he asked, as his pencil sped across the page. "'Gimblet--the clock--eleven--step,' is that it?"

His matter-of-fact voice soothed and reassured her. This little grey-haired man, sitting at her side, was somehow a very comfortable companion to one whose nerves were badly overwrought. Juliet pulled herself together.

"Steps," she corrected, and her voice sounded almost natural again.

"Not step."

"Do you suppose," asked the detective, "that he meant the English word, steps, or the Russian, steppes?"

"I don't know," said Juliet, surprised. "I never thought of it. But, Mr. Gimblet, I have not told anyone but you that he spoke after he was hit. I thought perhaps that he might have wished those last words of his to be kept private."

"Quite right," said Gimblet approvingly. "He did right to trust your discretion. And now, please, go on," he added, putting down his pencil; "what happened next?"

And Juliet answered him in a tone as calm as his own:

"I think I must have fainted."

CHAPTER IX

"The next thing I remember, was finding myself lying on the floor, and, when I tried to get up, seeing everything in the room swinging about me like the swinging boats at a fair. I don't know how long I had been unconscious, but when, at last, I managed to stand up, and clinging, faint and giddy, to the back of a chair, looked again at the motionless figure that sprawled across the writing-table, there was a great pool of blood on the polished oak of the floor beneath it, which grew slowly broader, as drop after drop dripped down to swell it. With a great effort I conquered my faintness, and staggered out of the room and down the long passage.

"In the billiard-room Mr. McConachan was still practising his game. He must have been making a break, for I remember hearing him speak, as I opened the door. 'Twenty-seven,' he said aloud. My voice wouldn't come, and I stood holding on to the doorpost, while he, with his back to me, went on potting the red.

"'That you, Miss Byrne?' he said, without looking round. Then, as I didn't answer, he glanced up and saw by my face, I suppose, that something was very wrong. He came quickly to me, his cue in his hand. 'What's the matter?' he said. 'Do you feel ill?' 'Lord Ashiel is dead,' I said; 'in the library. Some one shot him. Didn't you hear?' 'Dead?' he cried; 'Uncle Douglas shot! Do you know what you're saying! I heard a shot, it is true, five minutes ago, but surely that was the keeper shooting an owl or something.'

"I shook my head. 'He is dead,' I repeated dully. He looked at me, still

incredulous, and then darted forward and caught me by the arm. 'Here, sit down,' he said, and half pushed, half led me to a chair. I saw him run to the bell and tug violently at the rope. Then I believe I fainted again.

"I think that is all there is to tell you, Mr. Gimblet. You know already that the murderer got clear away, and the next morning footmarks were found outside the window which proved to have been made by Sir David Southern. I was so idiotic, when I was questioned, as to mention having spoken to him outside the gun-room door, and to repeat, incidentally, that he had said he had been cleaning his rifle. I never dreamt that anyone could be so mad as to suspect him. But they looked at the rifle, and found that it was dirty, so that it must have been discharged again since I saw him. And it appears he did not join in the search for the murderer, and was not seen until it was all over. And so they arrested him and took him away. No amount of evidence could ever make me believe for a moment that he had a hand in this dreadful thing, but oh, Mr. Gimblet, I see only too well how black it looks against him. What shall I do if you, too, now that I have told you everything, think he did it? You don't, do you?"

"My dear young lady," said the detective. "I really can't give you an opinion at present. There are a score of points I must investigate, a dozen other people besides yourself whom I must question, before I can form any kind of conclusion. I hope that Sir David Southern may prove to be a much wronged man. But beyond that I can't go, just at present; and I shouldn't build too much on my help if I were you. I'm not infallible; far from it. And I certainly can't prove him innocent if he is guilty."

He stood up, shaking the sand out of his clothes.

"Let us go on, up to the castle," he said.

The gates were near at hand; in silence they breasted the steep incline of the drive, which wound and zigzagged up between high banks covered with rhododendron and bracken, and grown over with trees. After a quarter of a mile these gave place to an abrupt, grass covered slope, whose top had been smoothed and levelled by the hand of man, and from which on the far side rose the castle of Inverashiel, its stout and ancient framework disguised and masked by the modern addition to the building which faced the approach; a mass of gabled and turreted stonework in the worst style of nineteenth century architecture which in Scotland often took on a shape and semblance even more fantastically repulsive than it assumed in the south. The great tower that formed the principal remaining portion of the old building could just be discerned over the top of the flaring facade, but the nature of the site was such that most of the ancient fortress was invisible from that part of the grounds. Juliet stopped at the turn of the road.

"I will leave you here," she said, "you will not want me, I suppose? After you have finished, will you come to Lady Ruth Worsfold's house, and tell me what you think? It is just past the station turning; you will easily find your way, though the house is hidden by the trees. Your luggage will be there already, as Lady Ruth is going to put you up."

Mr. Mark McConachan, or rather Lord Ashiel, as he had now become, was in the act of ending a solitary meal, when Gimblet was announced. He went to meet the detective, forcing to his trouble-lined face a smile of welcome that lit up the large melancholy eyes with an expression few people could resist.

"I thought it was another of those newspaper fellows, but, thank goodness, I believe they're all gone now," he said. "I am exceedingly glad to see you, Mr. Gimblet. I should myself have asked you to come to our aid, but I found that Miss Byrne had been before me. I suppose you have seen her?"

"Yes," said Gimblet. "She met me at the station. I'm afraid I'm rather late on the scene. I hear that the Glasgow police have come and gone, taking with them the author of the crime."

"It is a dreadful business altogether," returned young Ashiel. "I don't know which part of it is the worst. There's my uncle dead, shot down like a rat by some cold-blooded scoundrel; and now my cousin David, poor chap, in jail, and under charge of murder. It seems impossible to believe it of him, and yet, what is one to believe? One can only suppose that he must have been off his head if he did it. But have you had lunch, Mr. Gimblet? Sit down and have something to eat first of all; you can ask me any questions you wish while you are eating."

And he insisted on Gimblet's doing as he suggested.

"The household is naturally a bit disorganized," he said when the servants had left the room and the detective was busy with some cold grouse. "I had a cold lunch myself to save trouble; would you rather have something hot? I expect that a chop or something could be produced, if you are cold after your journey."

Gimblet assured him that he could like nothing better than what he already had.

"You have had Macross up here, haven't you?" he asked. "It is really disappointing to find the whole thing over before I arrive. I am afraid there is nothing left for me to do."

Mark looked at him quickly. Was it possible he accepted Macross's verdict without inquiring further himself?

"We are hoping you will undo what has been done," he said. "I look to you to get my cousin out of prison. Surely there must be some other explanation than that he did it. I simply won't believe it."

"If there is any other explanation," said Gimblet, "I will try and find it; but the affair looks bad against Sir David Southern from what I can hear."

"Why should he have shot through the window?" said Ashiel. "They were

both in the same house. Why should my cousin go into the garden, when he had nothing to do but to open the library door and shoot, if he wanted to?"

"Oh," said Gimblet, "ordinary caution would suggest the garden. He did not know perhaps, whether his uncle would be alone; and as a matter of fact, he was not, was he?"

"No, Miss Byrne was with him. By Jove," said Mark, bending forward to light a cigarette, "I shall never forget the fright it gave me when I saw her face. She looked as if--oh, she looked perfectly ghastly! I was in the billiard-room when she came in, as white as a sheet, and stood there without speaking for a minute, while I imagined every sort of catastrophe except the real one. And all the time I kept thinking it would turn out to be nothing really, as likely as not; women will look hideously frightened and upset if they cut their finger, or see a rat, or think they hear burglars. One never knows. And then at last she got out a few words, 'Lord Ashiel has been shot,' or something of the sort, and fainted."

"What did you do?" asked Gimblet.

"Well, I had to see to her, you know. I couldn't very well leave her in that state, could I? I hung on to the bell for all I was worth, and the butler and footmen came running. I told them to look after the young lady and to call her maid, and then I ran off to the library, followed by old Blanston, the butler. You know what we found there. My poor old uncle, dead as a door nail; a hole in the window where the bullet came in, and the floor around him all covered with blood. Ugh!" Mark shuddered, "it was horrid. We only stayed to make sure he was dead, and then we left him as we had found him and rushed back to rouse the rest of the household, and to start a chase after the murderer. Of course the first person I looked for was David Southern, but he wasn't to be found, so I and three menservants ran out at once with sticks and lanterns, and hunted all over the grounds without seeing or hearing anything or anyone. The hall boy had been sent down to fetch up the stablemen and chauffeur, and to rout out some of the gardeners and anyone else he could find, so that we were a decently large party, and I don't think there was an inch of ground we didn't go over, of all that lies within the policies. The murderer, however, had plenty of time to get right away, and as it was hopeless to scour the whole country side in that darkness--for it was as black as your hat--I decided, after an hour of groping about in the shrubberies, that we must leave off and wait for daylight."

"What time was it when you abandoned the hunt?" asked Gimblet.

"It was past midnight. I didn't see that any good could be done by sitting up all night. On the contrary, I thought it important that we should get some sleep while we could, so as to be fresher for the chase when daylight came. At this time of the year it gets light fairly early, so I sent every one to bed, except two of the ghillies, whom I told to row across the loch to Crianan and fetch the doctor and police, which I suppose I ought to have thought of before. Then I went to bed myself."

"And when did Sir David Southern turn up?" asked Gimblet.

"Oh, he appeared soon after we started to beat the policies. I hadn't time then to ask him where he'd been, and he was as keen on catching the murderer as anyone. Of course it never occurred to me to cross-question him."

"Naturally. Please go on with your narrative."

"Well, we slept, to speak for myself, for three or four hours, and then James and Andrew came back with the people I had sent for. And now, Mr. Gimblet, I come to a strange thing, a thing I've been careful not to mention to anyone but you, though I'm afraid it's bound to come out at the trial. When Blanston and I went out of the library, we locked the door behind us, but when I opened it again, to let in the doctor and the police, my uncle's body had been moved."

"Moved? How?" Gimblet repeated after him.

"Oh, not far, but it had been touched by some one, I am ready to swear, though I said nothing about it at the time. When we first found him, he was lying forward on the table with one arm under his head and the other hanging beside him. When I went in for the second time he was sitting sideways in his chair with his head and arm in quite a different place. Instead of being in the middle, on the blotting-pad, they were further to the right, on the bare polished wood."

Gimblet looked at him keenly.

"You are perfectly certain of this?" he said.

"Absolutely. Besides, you can ask Miss Byrne and Blanston. They both saw him as he was at first. And the police and Dr. Duncan can tell you what his position was when they went into the room. I said nothing about it to any of them, because I thought at once that it must be David who had been there."

"Why did you think that?"

"Because he knew where the key was. I took it out of my pocket when we were alone in the smoking-room before going up to bed, and asked him what I should do with it.

"'Oh, put it in a drawer,' he said, pointing to the writing-table, and I put it there, as he suggested. Of course I see now that some one else may have found the key in that drawer, but at first it did look as if David must, for some reason, have taken it, and been in the library, after I'd gone to bed."

"It seems very unlikely that anyone else would have hit on the place where you had put it," said Gimblet reflectively. "And if they had done so, would they have recognized the key? Is the library key

peculiar in any way?"

"It is rather an uncommon pattern," said Mark. "It is very old and strong. I think anyone who knew the key would have recognized it all right."

"It is hardly likely that anyone would have found it if they had had to search all through the house for it in the middle of the night," commented Gimblet. "Is there no other way of getting into the library?"

"No, there is only one door."

"How about the window? It was broken; could not anyone have put in a hand, or raised the sash?"

"I don't think anyone could have got in. It isn't a sash window. There are stone mullions and small leaded casements in the old part of the castle where the library is, and I doubt if anyone larger than a child could squeeze through; in fact, a child couldn't; there are iron bars down the middle, which make it too narrow."

"H'm," murmured Gimblet. "I should like to have a look at them. And what was the doctor's report?"

"He said that the injuries to the heart were such that death must have been instantaneous, or practically so."

"Did anything else come out?"

"Nothing, except the evidence against poor old David, I'm sorry to say."

"You haven't told me that yet," said Gimblet. "Go on from when the police arrived on the scene."

"As soon as it was daylight we started off again on our search. But right at the beginning of it, they came upon the footsteps."

"Ah, where were they?"

"The flower-bed outside the library window showed them plainly; the ground beyond that was mossy, and there were no other marks. We divided into two parties, one going west down the side of the loch, and the other north and east over the hills. Till ten o'clock or later we beat the country, searching behind every rock, and going through the woods and bracken in a close line. But we saw no sign of a stranger, and came back at last, dead beat, for food and a rest. When we got back we found that the policeman left in charge had been nosing about, and whiling away his time by collecting the boots of every one in the house and fitting them to the footprints on the flower-bed. As bad luck would have it, David's shooting-boots exactly fitted the marks."

"His shooting-boots?" said Gimblet. "He wouldn't be wearing shooting-boots after dinner."

"That's what he said himself, and there seems no imaginable reason why he should have worn them, unless--" Mark hesitated for a moment, and then went on in a tone perhaps rather too positive to carry complete conviction to a critical ear. "Of course not. He can't have put them on after dinner. The idea is ludicrous. He must have made those footmarks earlier in the day."

"Is that what he himself says?" asked the detective. He had finished eating, and was leaning back in his chair with that air of far-off contemplation which those best acquainted with him knew was habitually his expression when his attention and interest were more than usually roused.

"No," admitted Mark regretfully. "He doesn't. He sticks to it that he'd never been near the flower-bed, with boots, or without them; it's my belief his memory has been affected by the shock of all this. And he would insist on talking to the police, though they warned him that what he said might be used against him. I did all I could to stop him, but it was no good. It really looked as if he was doing his best to incriminate himself."

"How was that? What else did he say?"

"You see," said Mark, "when the Crianan man had got hold of the boots that matched the footprints, he was no end excited by his success. Pleased to death with himself, he was. And he was as keen as mustard on following up his rotten clue. The next thing he did was to want a look at David's guns. Of course we didn't make any objection to that, though if I'd known--well, it's no earthly thinking of that now. So off we all marched in procession to the gun-room, and it didn't take long to see that the only one of the whole lot there that hadn't been cleaned since it was last fired was the Mannlicher David had shot his stag with the day before. The silly ass of a constable took it up and squinted through it as solemn as a judge, and then he just handed it to my cousin, and 'What have you to say to this, Sir David?' says he. Infernal cheek! 'I shot it off yesterday, and haven't had time to clean it since,' said David, and I, for one, could have sworn he was speaking the truth. Why not, indeed? There was nothing improbable about it. But the dickens of the thing was that while we were all out of the house, and he had the place to himself, the policeman had routed out poor Miss Byrne and badgered her for an account of all that had happened the evening before; and she, without a thought of doing harm to any of us--I'm convinced she's as sorry for it now as I am myself--had mentioned incidentally that David had told her, when she saw him half an hour before the murder, that he'd just been cleaning his rifle. She'd told me so, too, as far as that goes, when she passed through the billiard-room on her way to the library. I happened to ask her if she knew what he was up to."

"Decidedly awkward for Sir David," said Gimblet meditatively, "but after all, some one else might have fired off the rifle after he had cleaned it."

Mark shook his head gloomily.

"There are difficulties about that," he said. "It happens that David is very fussy about his guns, always cleans them himself, you know, and won't let another soul touch 'em. And though he keeps them in the gunroom like the rest of us, he's got his own particular glass-fronted cupboard which he keeps the key of himself. My uncle and I share one between us, and generally leave the key in the lock, so that the keeper can get at the guns, which we never bother to clean ourselves. Not so David. Ever since we were boys he's had his own private cupboard, and no one but himself has ever been allowed to open it. We always spent our holidays here, and my uncle let us behave as if we were at our own house. David took out the key for the sergeant to use, and when he was asked if anyone else could have got at the rifle, he replied that it was impossible, as the key had been in his pocket the whole time, except for an hour or two while he was asleep, when it had lain on the table by his bedside."

"Did he deny having told Miss Byrne he had cleaned the rifle?" asked Gimblet.

"Yes; he said he hadn't told her so. It was all very unpleasant, and the police sergeant was as suspicious as you like, by this time. 'What were you doing when the alarm was given?' he asked David. 'I was out in the grounds,' said David, and that was rather a facer for the rest of us, I must confess. He went on to say that he had fancied he saw some one hanging about at the edge of the lawn--which is the opposite side of the house from the library--and gone out to make sure, but he had found no one, though he hunted about for nearly an hour, till he saw lights approaching and fell in with our party of searchers. He said that it was then he first heard what had happened."

Gimblet nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Miss Byrne said she saw him start off to look for some one," he remarked.

"Yes," said Mark eagerly, "there's no doubt he saw a man lurking in the darkness. And it was dark too," he added, "never saw such a black night in my life; I must say it beats me how he could have seen anyone. But his eyes were always rather more useful than mine," he concluded hastily.

"The police, however, seem to have thought it improbable," said Gimblet, "since they arrested your cousin for the murder."

"Stupid brutes!" said Mark viciously. "No, they would have it it was impossible he should have seen anyone. And what clinched it was the unlucky fact that David and my uncle had had a violent row the day before. My uncle shot David's dog; I must say I think it was uncalled for, and poor David was absurdly fond of the beast. He felt very savage about it, and all the ghillies heard what he said to Uncle Douglas."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, a lot of rot. He lost his temper. The idiotic thing he said was, that he'd a good mind to shoot _him_ and see how he liked it. Pure temper, you know. I don't believe David would hurt a hair of his head."

"Well, it was decidedly an indiscreet remark."

"It was imbecile. And of course the police heard all about it from the servants and keepers, and it fitted in only too well with all the rest about the footmarks and his absence from the house at the time, and the rifle and everything. By the by, the bullet was a soft-nosed one which fitted David's rifle; but for that matter it fitted mine--which is a .355 Mannlicher like his--or a dozen others on the loch side. It's a very common weapon on a Scotch forest. But taking one thing with another there was a good deal of evidence against him, so they made up their minds he had done it; and Macross, when he arrived from Glasgow with his myrmidons, agreed with the local idiots, and took him off. I'm certain there must be a mistake somewhere, but so far it seems jolly hard to hit on it. I hope you'll put your finger on the spot."

"I hope so," said Gimblet, but his voice was full of doubt. "It's hard to see how anyone else could have used his rifle after he cleaned it, since he admits that he locked it up and kept the key on him. Yes," he murmured to himself, "the rifle speaks very eloquently. What other interpretation can be put on these facts? I'm sure you must see that yourself," he went on, glancing up at Mark, who was feeling in his pocket for another cigarette. "Sir David told Miss Byrne he had cleaned his rifle; he told the police he then locked it up and that the key had been in his possession ever since. But the rifle was found to have been fired again since he had cleaned it. His only explanation was to contradict what he had previously said to Miss Byrne. Do those facts appear to you to leave any possible loophole of doubt as to his guilt?"

Mark struck a match and lighted his cigarette before he answered. When at length he did so his reluctance was very plain, and his voice full of regret.

"Poor old chap," he said. "I'm afraid he must have done it in some fit of madness. As you say, there is no other imaginable alternative."

Gimblet nodded philosophically.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

Mark hesitated.

"There's a letter which arrived for Uncle Douglas this morning," he said, "which you may think worth looking at. I daresay it's of no importance, but it struck me as rather odd."

He took a letter out of his pocket and handed it to the detective, who opened it and read as follows:

"Si Milord ne rend pas ce qu'il ne doit pas garder, le coup de foudre lui

tombera sur la tete."

There was no signature, nor any date.

Gimblet turned the sheet over thoughtfully. The message was typewritten on a piece of thin foreign paper; the postmark on the envelope was Paris, and the stamps French. He folded it again and replaced it in its cover.

"It seems the usual threatening anonymous communication," he observed.

"Have you any idea who it's from?"

Mark shook his head.

"None," he confessed. "It looks, though, as if my uncle had in his possession something belonging to the writer, doesn't it? Don't you think it might have something to do with the murder?"

"I don't see why the murderer should send a threatening letter after the deed was done," said the detective. "Still less could he have posted it in Paris on the very day the crime was committed."

"No, that's true enough," Mark admitted reluctantly.

"Has any suspicious looking person been seen about this place, this summer? Any foreigner, for instance?" asked the detective.

"No; no," Mark replied. "I should have heard of it for certain if there had been. It would have been an event, down here."

Gimblet dropped the subject.

"If I may," he said. "I will keep this. It may lead to something," he added, tucking the letter away in an inside pocket. "That's all, I suppose?"

Mark was silent for a minute. He seemed to be thinking.

"That's all I know about the murder," he said at last, "but there are plenty of complications apart from that. I suppose Miss Byrne told you that my uncle electrified us all by saying she was his daughter, only an hour or so before he died?"

Gimblet nodded. "Yes," he said, "she told me."

"It makes it very awkward for me," said Mark. "I want to do the right thing, but I'm hanged if I know what I ought to do. You see, my uncle used to say that he'd left his property between me and David; he never made any secret of it, and as a matter of fact I've had a communication from his London lawyers, telling me they have a very old will, made when I was a small boy, long before the birth of his son, and that everything is left to me. There were reasons why he may have thought David would be provided for--he was engaged to marry a very rich American, but she dropped him yesterday like a red-hot coal as soon as it began to look as

if he'd be suspected. She's gone now, I'm glad to say. As a matter of fact, if David can only be cleared of this horrible charge, I shall insist on dividing my inheritance with him. That is, if I can't get Miss Byrne to take it, or Miss McConachan, as I ought to call her now."

"Lord Ashiel could leave his money where he liked, couldn't he?" Gimblet inquired.

"Yes, he could, but he would naturally have left it to his daughter, if she really was his daughter. In fact, Miss McConachan says he told her he had done so, but I haven't come across the will so far, though I had a good hunt through his papers this morning; Blanston and the housekeeper, who say they witnessed some document which may have been a will, have no idea where it is. Of course, my uncle may have intended to say that he was going to make one, and Miss McConachan may have misunderstood him, but she seems to think he had some secret hiding-place of his own, and I hope to goodness you'll be able to hit on it, if he had. I can't stand the idea of profiting by a lost will, and I'd far rather simply hand over the money than bother to look for this missing paper."

"Oh, I daresay it will turn up," said Gimblet. "You haven't had much time to find it yet."

"My uncle was a very methodical man. Everything is in its place. You wait till you see his papers! If he made a will he must have hidden it somewhere where we shall never dream of looking for it. It's just waste of time hunting about, and I shall have another try at persuading my new cousin to let me make over everything to her."

"It is not every young man in your position who would part so readily with a large fortune," observed Gimblet.

But Mark awkwardly deprecated his approving words.

"Oh," he said, "I'm sure any decent chap would do the same in my place."

CHAPTER X

"And now," said Gimblet, "may I visit the scene of the crime?"

Mark took him first to his uncle's bedroom; a room austere in its simplicity, with bare white-washed walls and uncarpeted floor. No one could have hidden a sheet of paper in that room, thought the detective, as he gazed round it, after he had looked, with a feeling akin to guilt, on the features of the dead peer. He had not known how to protect this man from the dreadful fate that had struck him down from a direction so utterly unexpected, and he held himself, in a way, responsible for his death.

Then young Ashiel led him away, down a wide corridor into the billiard-room, and so into another passage, at the end of which a door of stout and time-darkened oak gave access to the library. It creaked noisily on its hinges, as he pushed it open and ushered Gimblet in. They stepped into a square room, comfortably furnished, with deep arm-chairs, and a large chippendale writing-table which stood at right angles to the bow window, so placed that anyone writing at it should have the light upon his left. It was rather a dark room, the walls being lined with books from floor to ceiling, except at two points: opposite the window an alcove, panelled in ancient oak, appeared in the wall; and above the fireplace, opposite the door, the wall was panelled in the same manner and covered by an oil painting, representing Lord Ashiel's grandmother. The polished boards were unconcealed by any rug or carpet, and reflected a little of the light from the window. An ominous discoloration near the writing-table showed plainly upon them.

In the glass of the mullioned casement was the small round hole made by the fatal bullet.

Gimblet glanced at the bureau on which the writing materials were set out in perfect order, and could not conceal his annoyance.

"Everything has been moved, I see," he said. "Why couldn't they leave it as it was for a few hours longer?"

"Nothing was touched till after the police had gone," said Mark. "I confess I did not think it necessary to leave things alone once they were out of the house. Not only have the housemaids been at work in here, but I spent most of the morning here myself, going through the papers in that bureau. Will it matter much?" He spoke with evident dismay.

"Never mind," said Gimblet, "I suppose Macross's people photographed everything, and I can get copies from them, I have no doubt. By the by, what did Sir David Southern say about having been in the room while you were in bed? Did he admit it; and did he say why he moved the body?"

"He said he'd not been near the place," replied Mark, looking more perplexed and worried than ever. "I can't understand it at all," he added. "Why should he deny it to me?"

Gimblet opened a drawer in the bureau. Papers filled it, tied together in bundles and neatly docketed. They seemed to be receipted bills. He glanced at the pigeon-holes, and opened one or two more drawers. Everywhere the most fastidious order reigned.

"You have been through all these?" he asked.

"Yes, but there is a cupboard full in the smoking-room. I thought of looking into those this afternoon."

"It would be a good plan," Gimblet agreed. "Don't let me keep you," And as the young man still lingered, "I prefer," he confessed, "to do my work alone. If you will kindly get me a shooting-boot of Sir David

Southern's, I shall do better if I am left to myself."

"If that is really the case," said Mark, "I have no choice but to leave you. I admit I should have liked to see your methods, but if I should be a hindrance--"

Gimblet did not deny it, and Mark departed to fetch the boots.

"This is not the identical pair," he said when he returned. "The police took those; but these come from the same maker and are nearly the same, so Blanston tells me."

"Ah, yes, Blanston," said Gimblet. "I must see him presently. Thanks very much."

Left alone, Gimblet examined the window, opening one of the small-paned casements, and measuring the space between the mullions and the central bars of iron. Satisfied as to the impossibility of any ordinary-sized person passing through those apertures, he took one more look round, and then with a swift movement drew each of the heavy curtains across the bay. They did not quite meet in the middle, as Juliet had observed. Then he made his way out into the garden through the door just outside, at the end of the passage which led from the billiard-room to the library.

The library was at the far end of the oldest portion of Inverashiel Castle. To Gimblet, examining it from the outside, it looked as if the room had been hewn out of the solid walls of the ancient fortress; for beyond the mullioned, seventeenth-century window, the wall turned sharply to the left and was continued with scarce a loophole in the stupendous blocks of its surface for a distance of fifty yards or so, where it was succeeded by the lower, less heavy battlements of the old out-works. In the angle formed by the turn and immediately opposite the window of the library, a long flower-bed, planted with standard and other rose trees, with violas growing sparsely in between, stretched its blossoming length, and continued up to the actual stones of the library wall. At the farther end of it, a thick hedge of holly bordered on the roses at right angles to the end of the battlements; while the lawn on his left was spangled with geometrically shaped beds showing elaborate arrangements of heliotrope, ageratum, calceolarias, and other bedding-out plants.

Gimblet walked slowly along the lawn at the edge of the bed, his eyes on the black peaty mould, where it was visible among the flowers. About twenty yards from the hedge, he stopped with a muffled exclamation. The bed in front of him was covered with footprints of all shapes and sizes; but plainly distinguishable among the rest were the neat nail-encrusted marks which matched the boot he held in his hand. He put it down on the ground and carefully made an imprint with it in the soil, beside the existing footmarks. It was easy to single out its fellows.

"Two extra nails," murmured Gimblet to himself, "but otherwise, the same. Probably made on the same last."

Stepping cautiously in the places where his predecessors had walked, he

followed the tracks that had betrayed Sir David Southern. They were numerous and distinct; he counted fourteen of each separate foot. First Sir David would seem to have walked straight across the bed, then returned and taken up his position near the middle. He was not contented with that, it seemed, for he had walked backwards five or six paces and then moved sideways again till he was exactly opposite the opening between the curtains. Here the ground was trampled down as if he had several times shifted slightly from one place to another. Whether or not he was exactly in line with the writing-table Gimblet could not see, as its position was hidden in the obscurity behind the drawn curtains. It would want a light there to prove that, thought Gimblet; still there was no reason to doubt that it was so. There were four or five more footmarks leading back to the lawn, and over these Gimblet stooped with particular interest.

With a tape measure, which he took from his pocket, he measured the distances between the prints, entering the various figures in his notebook, beside carefully drawn diagrams. Then he picked his way to the edge of the lawn, and stood a moment considering.

Apparently he was not satisfied, for presently he retraced his steps delicately to the middle of the bed, till he was once more just behind the place where the earth was trodden down. After pausing there an instant, he turned once more, and ran quickly back to the grass, without this time troubling himself to step in the chain of footprints used previously by the police. But he had not even yet finished; and was soon crouching down again, with the tape measure in one hand and the notebook in the other, poring over the evidence preserved so carefully by the impartial soil.

At last he got up, put his measure back in his pocket, and walked slowly towards the hedge. He had nearly reached it when something at his feet arrested his attention. He bent over it curiously.

Near the edge of the grass and parallel to it, there was an indentation a little over an inch wide and about the same depth. It extended in a straight line for perhaps nine inches, and what could have caused it was a puzzle to Gimblet. The turf was unbroken, and it looked as if an oblong, narrow, heavy object had rested there, sinking a little into the ground so as to leave this strange mark. Gimblet rubbed his forehead pensively, as he looked at it.

Suddenly as his introspective gaze wandered unconsciously over the ground before him, his attention was arrested by a second mark of the same perplexing shape, which he could see behind a rose-bush, more than half-way across the bed. Stepping as near the hedge as he could, the detective proceeded to examine this duplicate of the riddle. It seemed absolutely the same, though deeper, as was natural on the soft mould, and he found, by measuring, that it lay exactly parallel to the other. What could it be, he asked himself. A moment later, still another and yet stranger impression caught his eye. It was about the same width, but not more than half as long, and rounded off at each end to an oval. It was situated about a foot from the deep indentation and rather farther from

the holly hedge. A tall standard rose-tree, covered with blossoms of the white Frau Karl Drouski rose, grew near it, interposing between it and the house.

Gimblet measured it with painstaking precision; then with the help of his measurements, he made a life-size diagram of it on the page of his notebook, and studied it with an expression of annoyance. He had seldom felt more at a loss to explain anything. At length he turned and went back towards the grass.

"What a track I leave," he thought to himself, looking down ruefully at his own footprints. "What I want is--" He stopped abruptly as a sudden idea struck him; then a look of relief stole slowly over his face, and he permitted himself a gratified smile, "To be sure!" he said, and seemed to dismiss the subject from his mind.

Indeed, he turned his back upon the rose-bed, and strolled away by the side of the hedge, which was of tall and wide proportions, providing a spiky, impenetrable defence against observation, from the outside, of the rectangular enclosed garden. Half-way along it he came upon an arched opening. Passing through this, he found himself in an outer thicket, and immediately upon his right hand beheld a small shed, which stood back, modest and unassuming, in a leafy undergrowth of rhododendrons.

Gimblet pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The place was evidently a tool-house, used by the gardeners for storing their implements. Rakes, spades, forks and hoes leant against the walls; a shelf held a quantity of odds and ends: trowels, seedsmen's catalogues, a pot of paint, a bundle of wooden labels, the rose of a watering-can, and a dozen other small objects. On the floor were piled boxes and empty cases; flowerpots stood beside a bag which bore the name of a patent fertilizer; a small hand mowing-machine blocked the entrance; and a plank, too long to lie flat on the ground, had been propped slantwise between the floor and the roof. Bunches of bass hung from nails above the shelf; and on the wall opposite, a coloured advertisement, representing phloxes of so fierce an intensity of hue that nature was put to the blush, had been tacked by some admirer of Art.

Five minutes later, when Gimblet emerged once more into the open, he carried in one hand a garden rake. With this he proceeded to thread his way through the shrubbery, keeping close to the line of the holly hedge. When he thought he had gone about fifty yards, he lay down and peered under the leaves. The hedge was rather thinner at the bottom; and, by carefully pushing aside a little of the glossy, prickly foliage, he was able to make out that the end of the rose-bed he had lately examined was separated from him now only by the dividing barrier of the hedge. With the rake still in his hand, he drew himself slowly forward, gingerly introducing his head and arms under the holly, till he was prevented from going farther by the close growing trunks of the trees that formed the hedge.

It took some manoeuvring to insert the head of the rake through the

fence, but he did it at last, and found a gap which his arms would pass also. Between, and under the lowest fringe of leaves on the farther side, he could see the track of his own footsteps, where he had walked on the bed. They were all, by an effort, within reach of his rake, and he stealthily effaced them. He could not see whether the garden was still untenanted, or whether the peculiar phenomenon of a rake moving without human assistance was being observed by anyone from the castle. He fervently hoped that it was not: he did not wish the attention of anyone else to be called to the puzzling marks that had mystified him; and, as the only window which looked into the garden was that of the library, he thought there was a good chance that there was no one in sight.

Cautiously and almost silently he worked his way back, and replaced the rake in the tool-house where he had found it. Then he took the small oil-can used for oiling the mowing-machine, and concealing it under his coat made towards the house. The little garden was still lonely and deserted as he walked quickly over the lawn and in at the passage door.

The library was empty as he had left it, and his first act was to draw back the curtains to their former positions on either side of the window. Then he went to the door, and, with a glance to right and left along the passage, and an ear bent for any approaching footstep, he quickly and effectually oiled the hinges and lock, so that the door closed noiselessly and without protest. When he was quite satisfied on this point, he shut it gently, and took back the oil-can to the shed.

"Now," said he to himself, "for the gun-room."

He took up Sir David Southern's shooting-boots, which he had left in the tool-house during his last proceedings, and made his way through the billiard-room into the main corridor beyond. On his right, through an open door, he peeped into a large room, obviously the drawing-room, and saw that it looked on to the front of the house. The room wore a forlorn aspect; no one, apparently, had taken the trouble to put it straight since the night of the tragedy. The blinds had been drawn down, but the furniture seemed awry as if chairs had been pushed back hastily, a little card table still displayed a game of patience half set out, and even the dead flowers in the glasses had not been thrown away.

The air was stuffy in the extreme, and Gimblet, with a disgusted sniff, pulled aside one of the blinds and threw open the window. But all at once a thought seemed to strike him. For a moment he stood irresolute, then he slowly closed the casement again, but without latching it, and after frowning at it thoughtfully walked away. He went back into the hall.

Opposite, across the corridor, rose the main staircase, wide and imposing; on each side of it a smaller passage led away at right angles to the entrance, the right-hand one giving access to rooms in the new front of the castle, one of which he knew to be the dining-room. He listened for a minute outside a door beyond it, and heard the sound of rustling papers; the smell of tobacco came to him through the key-hole. It was plain that here was the smoking-room, and that the new Lord Ashiel was at that moment engaged in it, and deep in his uncle's papers.

The little detective, as he had said, preferred to work without an audience when he could, so he left Mark to his search, and stole silently away down the passage.

He passed two more rooms, and paused at the last door, opposite the foot of a winding stair.

This, from what Juliet had said, must be the door of the gun-room.

The door opened readily at his touch, and he stepped inside and shut it behind him.

It was a small bare room, with one large deal table in the middle of it. Gun-cases and wooden cartridge-boxes were ranged on the linoleum-covered floor, and three glass-fronted gun-cabinets were hung upon the walls. One, the smallest of these, was of a different wood from the others, and bore in black letters the initials D. S.

Three or four guns were ranged in it: two 12-bore shot-guns, an air-gun, and a little 20-bore. Another rack was empty; no doubt it had held the Mannlicher rifle, which the police had carried away to use as evidence in their case for the prosecution. The door was locked and there was no sign of a key.

Gimblet turned to the other cupboards.

There were more weapons here, and a few minutes' examination showed him that, as Mark had said, he and his uncle were less particular as to where their guns were kept, for the first two that the detective glanced at bore Lord Ashiel's initial, and the next was an old air-gun with M. McC. engraved on a silver disk at the stock.

Side by side were the rifles used by the uncle and nephew for stalking, Gimblet knew from Mark that the Mannlicher was his, while Lord Ashiel had apparently used a Mauser or Ross sporting rifle, as there was one of each in the case.

Gimblet lifted down the Mannlicher and laid it on the table. This, then, was the kind of weapon with which the deed had been done. It was a .355 Mannlicher Schonauer sporting weapon of the latest pattern. He opened it and examined the mechanism, which he soon grasped. He squinted down the glistening tunnel of the barrel and even closely scrutinized the workmanship of the exterior, repressing a shudder at the meretricious design of the chasing on the lock, and passing his fingers caressingly over the wood of which the stock was made. It shone with a rich bloom, as smooth and even as polished marble, except at the butt end which was criss-crossed roughly to prevent slipping; but wood in any shape has a homely friendly feeling, as different from any the polisher can impart to a piece of cold stone as the forests, where it once stood, upright and lofty, are from the inhospitable rocks on the peaks above them.

These unpractical reflections flitted through the detective's mind,

together with others of a less fantastic nature, as he put the rifle back in the rack he had taken it from. He closed the glass doors of the cabinet, leaving them unlocked, as he had found them. Then, going back to the table, he took an empty pill-box from his pocket, and with the utmost care swept into it a trace of dust from off the bare deal top.

There was barely enough to darken the cardboard at the bottom of the box, but he looked at it, before putting on the lid, with an expression of some satisfaction.

CHAPTER XI

Gimblet left the gun-room quietly; and after some more exploring discovered the way to the back premises.

In the pantry he found Blanston, whom he invited to follow him to the deserted billiard-room for a few minutes' conversation.

"You know," he told him, "Miss Byrne and your new young master want me to examine the evidence that Sir David Southern is the author of this terrible crime."

"I'm sure I wish, sir," said the man, "that you could prove he never did it. A very nice young gentleman, sir, Sir David has always been; it seems dreadful to think of him lifting his hand against his uncle. I'm sure it ought to be a warning to us all to keep our tempers, but of course it was very hard on Sir David to have his dog shot before his very eyes."

"No doubt," agreed Gimblet. "You weren't there when it happened, I suppose?"

"No, sir, but I heard about it from one of the keepers, and Sir David was very much put out about it, so he says; and I quite believe it, seeing how fond he was of the poor creature. Always had it to sleep in his room, he did, sir, though it was rather an offensive animal to the nose, to my way of thinking. But these young gentlemen what are always smoking cigarettes get to lose their sense of smell, I've often noticed that, sir. Oh, I understand he was very angry indeed, sir, but I should hardly have thought he would go so far as to take his uncle's life. Knowing him, as I have done, from a child, I may say I shouldn't hardly have thought it of him, sir."

"Life is full of surprises," said Gimblet, "and you never know for certain what anyone may not do; but, tell me, you were the first on the scene of the crime, weren't you?"

"Hardly that, sir. Miss Byrne was with his lordship at the time."

"Yes, yes, of course. But you saw him shortly after the shot was fired."

Did you hear the report?"

"No, sir. The hall is quite away from the tower, and so is the housekeeper's room; and the walls are very thick. We were just finishing supper, which was very late that night on account of the gentlemen coming in late from stalking, and one thing and another. I'm rather surprised none of us heard it, sir."

"I daresay there was a good deal of noise going on," said Gimblet. "How many of you are there in the servants' quarters?"

"Counting the chauffeur and the hall boy," replied Blanston, "and including the visitors' maids, who are gone now, we were sixteen servants in the house that night. I am afraid there may have been rather a noise going on."

"Were you all there?" asked Gimblet. "Had no one left since the beginning of supper?"

"No one had gone out of the room or the hall since supper commenced," Blanston assured him. "We were all very glad of that afterwards, as it prevented any of us being suspected, sir. Though in point of fact I was saying only last night, when the second footman dropped the pudding just as he was bringing it into the room, that we could really have spared him better than what we could Sir David, sir; but of course it's natural for the household to be feeling a bit jumpy till after the funeral to-morrow. When that's over I shan't listen to no more excuses."

"Quite so," said Gimblet. "What was the first intimation you got that there was anything wrong?"

"About half-past ten the billiard-room bell rang very loud, in the passage outside the hall. Before it had stopped, and while I was calling to George, the first footman, to hurry up and answer it, there came another peal, and then another and another. I thought something must be wrong, so I ran out of the room and upstairs with the others. When we got to the billiard-room there was Miss Byrne fainting on a chair, and Mr. McConachan beside her, looking very upset like. 'There's been an accident or worse,' he says, 'to his lordship. Come on, Blanston, and let's see what it is. And you others look after Miss Byrne. Fetch her maid; fetch Lady Ruth.'

"And with that he makes for the library door, at a run, with me following him close, though I was a bit puffed with coming upstairs so fast. Just as we came to the library door, he turns and says to me, with his hand on the knob, 'From what Miss Byrne says, Blanston, I'm afraid it's murder.' And before I could more than gasp he had the door open, and we were in the room.

"There was his poor lordship lying forward on the table, his head on the blotting-book, and one arm hanging down beside him. Quite dead, he was, sir, and his blood all on the floor, poor gentleman. We left him as we found him, and went back.

"Mr. McConachan locked the door and put the key in his pocket. 'No one must go in there till the police come,' he says. 'But in the meantime we must get what men we can together, and see if the brute who did this isn't lurking about the grounds. It will be something if we can catch him, and avenge my poor uncle,' he said."

Gimblet considered for a moment.

"Are you sure you remember the position you found the body in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Blanstun, in some surprise. "It was like I told you. His head on the blotting-book and one arm with it. He must have fallen straight forward on to the table."

"Thank you," said Gimblet. "One more question. I hear you witnessed a will for Lord Ashiel a day or two before he died?"

"Yes, sir--I and Mrs. Parsons, the housekeeper."

"How did you know it was the will?"

"We didn't exactly know it was, sir, but afterwards, when it came out his lordship had told Miss Byrne he had made one, we thought it must have been that."

"I see," said Gimblet. "Thank you. That is all I wanted to know."

He sent for the other servants and interrogated them one by one, but without adding anything fresh to what he had already learned.

He went thoughtfully away and sought out Mark in the smoking-room, where he found him surrounded by packets of papers, which lay in heaps upon the floor and tables.

"There's a frightful lot to look through," said the young man despondently, looking up from his self-imposed task. "I haven't found anything interesting yet. How did you get on? Do you think those footmarks can possibly be anyone's but David's?"

"The boot you gave me fits them too well to admit of doubt, I'm afraid," said Gimblet. And as the other made a half-gesture of despair, "You must give me more time," he said; "I may find some clue in the course of the next two or three days. By the by, is your cousin a short man?"

"No," said Mark, "he's about my height. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I had an idea," said Gimblet evasively. "But if he's as tall as you, I had better begin again. I think I'll take a little stroll through the grounds," he added, "and then back to Lady Ruth Worsfold's house, and get a bath and a change."

"I shall see you at dinner-time," said Ashiel. "I am dining at the

cottage. Au revoir till then."

Gimblet went out of the front door, and proceeded to make a tour of the Castle buildings.

Turning to his left round the front of the house, he passed the gun-room door, and went down a short path, which led to the level of the servants' quarters. These were built on the slope of the hill, so that what was a basement in the front of the house was level with the ground at the back.

Here more remains of the old fortress were to be seen. The various outbuildings that straggled down towards the loch had all once formed part of old block-houses or outlying towers; and, as the path descended farther down the hill, the detective found himself walking round the precipitous rock from which the single great tower still standing--the one in whose massive shell the room had been cut which was now the library--dominated the scene from every side.

It had been built at the very edge of the hill which here fell almost sheer to the level of the lake, and the old McConachans had no doubt chosen their site for its unscalable position. Indeed, the place must always have been impregnable from that side, the rock offering no foothold to a goat till within twenty feet of the base of the tower, where the surface was broken and uneven, and had, in places, been built up with solid masonry. In the crevices up there, seeds had germinated and grown to tall plants and bushes. Ivy hung about the face of the escarpment like a scarf, and in one place a good-sized tree, a beech, had established itself firmly upon a ledge and leant forward over the path below in a manner that turned the beholder giddy. Its great roots had not been able to grow to their full girth within the cracks and crannies of the rocks; some of them had pushed their way in through the gaps in the masonry, and the others curled and twisted in mid air, twining and interlacing in an outspread canopy.

Beyond the tower ran the battlemented wall of the enclosed garden, its foundations draped in the thrifty vegetation of the rocks.

At Gimblet's feet, on the other side of the path, brawled a burn, hurrying on its way to the loch, and he followed its course slowly down to the place where it mingled with the deep waters. A little beyond he saw the point of a fir-covered peninsula, and wandered on under the trees till he came to the end of it; there he sat down to think over what he had heard and seen that afternoon. The wild beauty of the place soothed and delighted him, and he felt lazily in his pocket for a chocolate.

Below him, grey lichen-grown rocks jugged into the loch in tumbled, broken masses, piled heedlessly one on the other, as if some troll of the mountain had begun in play to make a causeway for himself. The great stones, so old, so fiercely strong, stood knee-deep in the waters, over which they seemed to brood with so patient and indifferent a dignity that human life and affairs took on an aspect very small and inconsiderable. They were like monstrous philosophers, he thought,

oblivious alike to time and to the cold waves that lapped their feet; their heads crowned here and there with pines as with scattered locks, the little tufts of heather and fern and grasses, that clung to them wherever root hold could be found, all the clothing they wore against the bitter blasts of the winds.

While he sat there a breeze got up and ruffled the loch; the ripples danced and sparkled like a cinematograph, and waves threw themselves among the rocks with loud gurglings and splashings. The air was suddenly full of the noise and hurry of the waters. He got up and went to the end of the peninsula. In spite of the dancing light upon the surface and the merry sounds of the ripples, the water, he could see, was deep and dark; a little way out a pale smooth stone rose a few feet above the level of it, its top draped in a velvet green shawl of moss. A fat sea-gull sat there; nor did it move when he appeared.

A little bay ran in between the rocks, its shore spread with grey sand, smooth and trackless. At least so Gimblet imagined it at first, as his eye roved casually over the beach. Then suddenly, with a smothered ejaculation, he leaped down from his perch of observation, and made his way to the margin of the water.

There, scored in the sand, was a deep furrow, reaching to within a foot of the waves, where it stopped as if it had been wiped out from a slate with a damp sponge. Gimblet had no doubt what it was. A boat had been beached here, and that lately. A glance at the stones surrounding the bay showed him that the water was falling, for in quiet little pools, within the outer breakwater of rocks, a damp line showed on the granite a full quarter of an inch above the water. By a rapid calculation of the time it would take for that watermark to dry, the detective was able to form some idea of the rate at which the loch was falling, and he thought he could judge the slope of the beach sufficiently well to calculate about how long it was since the track in the sand had reached to the brink of the waves.

It was a rough guess, but, if he were right, then a boat had landed in that bay some forty-two hours ago. But there were other traces, besides, the tracks of him who had brought the boat ashore. From where Gimblet stood, a double row of footprints, going and returning, showed plainly between the water and the stones to which the sand quickly gave place. They were the tracks left by large boots with singularly pointed toes, and with no nails on the soles. Emphatically not boots such as any of the men of those parts would be likely to wear.

Gimblet bent over the sand.

When he rose once more and stood erect upon the beach, he saw under the shadow of the pines the figure of a tall thin man with a lean face and straggling reddish moustache, who was watching him with an eye plainly suspicious. He was dressed in knickerbockers and coat of rough tweed of a large checked pattern, and carried a spy-glass slung over his back. The detective went to him at once.

"Are you employed on the Inverashiel estate?" he asked civilly.

"I'm Duncan McGregor, his lordship's head keeper," was the reply, given in the cold tones of one accosted by an intruder.

Gimblet hastened to introduce himself and to explain his presence, and McGregor condescended to thaw.

"I should be very much obliged," said Gimblet, "if you would take a look at the sands where you saw me standing. I'd like to know your opinion on some marks that are there."

The keeper strode down to the beach.

"A boat will have been here," he pronounced after a rapid scrutiny.

"Lately?" asked Gimblet.

He saw the man's eyes go, as his own had done, to the watermarks on the rocks.

"No sae vary long ago," he said, "I'm thinkin' it will hae been the nicht before lairst that she came here."

"Ah," said Gimblet, "I'm glad you agree with me. That's what I thought myself. Do boats often come ashore on this beach?"

McGregor considered.

"It's the first time I ever h'ard of onybody doin' the like," he said at last. "The landin' stage is awa' at the ether side o' the p'int; it's aye there they land. There's nae a man in a' this glen would come in here, unless it whar for some special reason. It's no' a vary grand place tae bring a boat in. The rocks are narrow at the mouth."

"Do strangers often come to these parts?"

"There are no strangers come to Inverashiel," said the keeper. "The high road runs at the ether side o' the loch through Crianan, and the tramps and motors go over it, but never hae I known one o' that kind on our shore."

Gimblet observed with some amusement that the man spoke of motors and tramps as of varieties of the same breed; but all he said was:

"Could you make inquiries as to whether anyone on the estate happens to have brought a boat in here during the last week? I should be glad if you could do so without mentioning my name, or letting anyone think it is important."

He felt he could trust the discretion of this taciturn Highlander.

"I'll that, sir," was the reply.

And Gimblet could see, in spite of the man's unchanging countenance, that he was pleased at this mark of confidence in him.

"Could you take me to the head gardener's house?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject. "I should rather like a talk with him."

McGregor conducted him down the road to the lodge.

"It's in here whar Angus Malcolm lives," he remarked laconically. "Good evening, sir."

He turned and strode away over the hillside, and Gimblet knocked at the door. It was opened by the gardener, and he had a glimpse through the open doorway of a family at tea.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you," he said. "I will look in again another day. Lord Ashiel referred me to you for the name of a rose I asked about, but it will do to-morrow."

The gardener assured him that his tea could wait, but Gimblet would not detain him.

"I shall no doubt see you up in the garden to-morrow," he said. "The roses in that long bed outside the library are very fine, and I am interested in their culture. I wonder they do so well in this peaty soil."

"Na fie, man, they get on splendid here," said Malcolm. He liked nothing better than to talk about his flowers, but, being a Highlander, resented any suggestion that his native earth was not the best possible for no matter what purpose. "We just gie them a good dressin' doon wie manure ilka year."

"Do you use any patent fertilizer?" Gimblet asked.

"Oh, just a clean oot wie a grain o' basic slag noo and than," said the gardener. "And I just gie them some lime ilka time I think the ground is needin' it."

"Well, the result is very good," said the detective. "By the way, have you been working on that bed lately? I picked this up among the violas. Did you happen to drop it?"

He took from his pocket a small paper notebook, and held it out interrogatively.

"Na, I hinna dropped it," answered the gardener. "It micht have been some one fay the castel. I hinna been near that rose-bed for fower or five days. And it couldna hae been lying there afore the rain."

Indeed, the little book showed no trace of damp on its green cover.

"I asked in the castle, but no one claimed it," said Gimblet. "Perhaps

it belongs to one of your men?"

"There's been naebody been workin' there this week. So it disna belong tae neen o' the gair'ners, if it's there ye fund't," repeated Malcolm.

"There's been nae work deen on that bed for the last fortnicht or mair. I was thinkin' o' sendin' a loon ower't wie a hoe in a day or twa. Ye see, wie the murrder it's been impossible tae get ony work done; apairt fay that we've been busy wie the fruit and ether things."

"I didn't notice any weeds," said Gimblet. "But I won't keep you any longer, now. Perhaps to-morrow afternoon I may see you in the garden, and if so I shall get you to tell me the name of that rose."

CHAPTER XII

Juliet failed to extract much comfort from Gimblet when, about six o'clock, she met him coming up through the garden to Inverashiel Cottage.

All the afternoon she had possessed her soul in what patience she could muster, which was not a great deal. Still, by dint of repeating to herself that she must give the detective time to study the facts, and opportunity to verify them at his leisure and in his own way, she had managed to get through the long inactive hours, and to force herself not to dwell upon the vision of David in prison, which, do as she would, was ever before her eyes.

Events had followed one another so fast during the last few days that her mind was dulled, as by a succession of rapid blows, and she was hardly conscious of anything beyond the unbearable pain caused by the cumulative shocks she had undergone.

First had come the heart-rending knowledge that David loved her; heart-rending only because he was bound to Miss Tarver, for, if it had not been for that paralyzing obstacle, she knew she would have gladly followed him to the ends of the earth. Indeed, in spite of everything, his betrayal of his feelings towards her had filled her with a joy that almost counterbalanced the hopeless misery to which, on her more completely realizing the situation, it gradually gave place.

Then had come the swift physical disaster from which she had barely escaped with her life. She had not had time to recover from this when, a few hours later, she had been called upon to face the emotions and agitations aroused by the news of her relationship to Lord Ashiel, and the history of her birth and parentage. In the midst of this excitement had come the sudden tragedy of which she had been a witness, and which had overwhelmed and prostrated her with grief and horror. Next day she had been obliged to undergo the ordeal of being cross-questioned by the police, and close upon that had come the final catastrophe of David's arrest and departure. This last shock so overshadowed all the rest of her

misfortunes that it stimulated her to action, and she had herself run most of the way to the post office two miles down the road, to send the telegram of appeal to Gimblet.

Once that was dispatched, hope revived a little in her heart.

Lord Ashiel, her father, had told her to send for the detective if she were in trouble. Well, she was in trouble; she had sent for him; he would come, and somehow he would find a way of putting straight this hideous nightmare in which she found herself living. How happy, in comparison, had been her life in Belgium, in the household of her adopted father and stepmother! She could have found it in her heart to wish she had never left their roof; but that would have involved never making the acquaintance of David, a possibility she could not contemplate.

Even now the remembrance of the rapidity with which Miss Tarver had packed her traps, renounced her betrothed and all his works, and fled from the scene of disaster by the first available train, did much to cheer her in the midst of all her depression.

It was not, however, until some time after Lady Ruth Worsfold had asked her to stay with her for the present, and she had removed herself and her belongings to the cottage, that she realized how impossible it was for her to make good her position as Lord Ashlers daughter and heir. She had his word for it, and that was enough for her; but she understood, as soon as it occurred to her, that more would be required by the law before she could claim either the name or the inheritance which should be hers.

In the meantime, though touched by the generosity of the new Lord Ashiel, who offered to waive his rights in her favour, and indeed suggested other plans for enabling her to remain at the castle as its owner, she felt that what he proposed was absolutely impossible, and while she thanked him, declined firmly to do anything of the sort.

At the back of her mind was the conviction that the will her father had spoken of would come to light. It would surely be found, if not by herself, then by Gimblet. She acceded to Mark's request that she should join him in looking through his uncle's papers. They went over those in the library together before she left the house.

Now that Gimblet had come back from the castle, where he had spent half the day, he must have good news for her, she felt persuaded. But to all her questions he would only reply that he had nothing definite to tell her, and that she must wait till to-morrow or even longer. Indeed, she thought he seemed anxious to get away from her, and asked at once if he might see his room.

"I want a bath more than anything," he said. And then, taking pity on her distress, "I wouldn't worry myself too much about Sir David's safety if I were you," he added, looking at her with a very kind, friendly light in his eyes. But as she exclaimed joyfully and pressed him to be more explicit, his look changed to one of admonition, and he held a finger to his lips. "Not a word to a living soul, whoever it may be," he cautioned

her, "and be careful not to show any hope you may be so optimistic as to feel," he added, smiling, "or you may ruin the whole thing. This is a very dark and dangerous affair, and the less it is spoken about, even between friends, the better."

"Mayn't I even tell Lady Ruth?" she asked. "She is very anxious, I know."

"Better not," he warned her. "It may be better for Sir David in the long-run, if his friends think him guilty a few days longer. It will be wisest if you let it appear that even you can hardly continue to cling to the idea of his innocence. You can be trusted to act a part where such great issues are involved, can you not? More may depend on it than you think."

"I'll be silent as the grave," she cried. "As the grave," she repeated more soberly, and turned away, reproaching herself silently, since in her anxiety for David her sorrow for her father had been a moment forgotten.

When Gimblet came down again, clean and refreshed, he found no one but his hostess, Lady Ruth Worsfold.

Lady Ruth's hair was white, in appearance she was short and squat, and she had a curiously disconnected habit of conversation, but for all that she was a person of great discernment, and uncommonly wide awake. She sided staunchly with Juliet in her belief in David's innocence.

"Never," she said, "will I credit such a thing of the lad. You may say what you like, Mr. Gimblet, you can prove till you're black in the face that he murdered every soul in the house, it won't make any difference to me."

"Who do you think did do it, Lady Ruth?" Gimblet asked.

"What do I know? An escaped lunatic, one of the keepers, the under housemaid, anyone you like. What does it matter? It wasn't David, even though his namesake did kill Goliath, and I always disliked the name, having suffered from a Biblical one myself. I said to his mother when he was born. 'For goodness' sake give the poor child a name he won't be expected to live up to. Just fancy how his friends will hate to be known as Jonathans, let alone thingamy's wife. You're laying up a scandal for your son,' I told her, and if my words haven't come true it's more thanks to him than to his parents. A nice pink and white baby he was, poor boy. There's just one good side to this dreadful affair," she went on without a pause, "and that is that the young lady with the dollars whom he was to have married, and hated the sight of, has thrown him over. The first least little breath of suspicion was enough for her, and the moment he was downright accused she was off. And he's well rid of her, dollars and all An Englishman of his birth and looks doesn't need to go to Chicago for a wife."

"Was Sir David in need of money?" asked Gimblet.

"He hasn't got a penny," said Lady Ruth. "Not a red cent, as that

terrible young woman put it. His father left everything to the moneylenders, so to speak, and David couldn't bear to see his mother poverty-stricken. He did it entirely for her sake--got engaged, I mean--but I don't think he'd have been such a self-sacrificing son if he'd met Miss Juliet Byrne a little earlier in the day."

"Indeed!" said Gimblet. "I thought Miss Byrne seemed very much worried about his arrest."

"Worried? Poor child, she's the ghost of what she was a few days ago. Half-drowned, too, when it happened, which made it worse for her."

"She must have had a narrow escape," Gimblet remarked. "What was the name of the man who pulled her out of the river?"

"Andy Campbell. He had been stalking with Mark McConachan."

"Was young Lord Ashiel with him?"

"No, he was on ahead. He saw Juliet in the distance, just going up to the waterfall, but he seems to have taken her for Miss Romaninov, which is odd, because they aren't in the least like one another, one being tall and the other short, in the first place, and one fair and the other dark in the second. He can't have looked very carefully. However, he was very positive about it till they both assured him that Julia Romaninov had turned and gone home some time before she had reached the top pool. And I certainly should have in her place. It doesn't amuse me scrambling over rocks and scratching my legs in bramble bushes. The path Andy came by goes along high above the water for half a mile. I hate walking on a height myself. And for most of that distance the river is not in sight. If he hadn't been thirsty and come down to the water-side for a drink at a spring near by, he would never have seen Miss Byrne floating down the stream, and she would have been in the loch pretty soon. It just shows how much better it is to drink water than whisky."

"It was lucky he did," said Gimblet. "Does the path pass in sight of the pool she fell into?"

"No. The banks are high there, and you can't see down into the pool unless you go to the very edge of the precipice. I did it once, to look at the waterfall, and I very nearly joined it. It's a nasty giddy place, though why one should feel inclined to throw oneself down I can't imagine; but it seems a natural instinct, and it's certainly easier to go down than up."

"It appears almost miraculous that she wasn't drowned," said Gimblet. "She certainly can have been in no fit state to bear the events that followed."

"No, indeed. She has lost everything: father, family and lover at one blow. You know Lord Ashiel said she was his daughter, and told her he'd made a will leaving everything to her. For that matter the lawyers say he didn't--not that I should ever believe anything a lawyer said. They

always mean something you wouldn't expect from their words. They do it, I believe, to keep in practice for trials, you know, where they have to make the witnesses say what they don't mean, poor things. And what I shall have put into my mouth by them, if I'm called as a witness against poor David, doesn't bear thinking of. But the Lord knows what Ashiel did with the will, and, as I was saying, it can't be found."

"So I heard," said Gimblet "You talk of being called as a witness, Lady Ruth. Do you know anything about the case? Where were you when the shot was fired?"

"Oh no," she said, "I shouldn't have anything to tell, but I don't suppose that will matter. They'll twist and turn my words till I find myself saying I saw him do it with my own eyes. My poor dear husband, when I first met him, was an eminent Q.C., as you may know, Mr. Gimblet, so I have a very good idea what they're like. I refused him point-blank when he proposed, but he proved to me in three minutes that I'd really accepted him; and it was the same thing ever after. A wonderfully brilliant man, though slightly trying at times, especially in church, where he always snored so unnecessarily loud--or so it seemed to me. I often think deafness has its compensations, though I'm sure I ought to be thankful at my age that my hearing is still so acute. However, I didn't hear the shot the other night, but the castle walls are thick even in that detestable modern addition, and besides, Julia Romaninov has got such a tremendously powerful voice,"

"Were you talking to her?"

"Oh dear no! I was playing patience, and she was singing, while Miss Tarver murdered the accompaniment. We little thought at the time that some one else was murdering poor Ashiel while we were sitting there in peace. I must say that girl sings remarkably well, and it was a pity there was no one who could play for her. Though it wasn't for want of practice on Miss Tarver's part. The moment we were out of the dining-room she would sit down at the piano, and they would neither of them stop till bedtime."

"Had they both been playing and singing all that evening?"

"Yes, they hadn't ceased for a moment, and I found it prevented the Demon from coming out, as I couldn't help counting in time with the music. It was all right when it was one, two, three, but common time muddled it dreadfully, though now I come to think of it, Julia was not actually in the room when we heard the bad news. She'd gone upstairs to look for a song or something. Of course there's no legal proof that Juliet really is his child," Lady Ruth continued; "she admits that he was rather vague about it, fancied a resemblance, in fact. Not that I or anyone else had any notion he had been married as a young man, but that's a thing he would be likely to be right about. I must say Mark has behaved extremely well about it, even quixotically. He wanted her to take his inheritance, and when she refused--and of course she couldn't decently do otherwise--I'm blessed if he didn't ask her to marry him."

Gimblet looked up with more interest than he had yet shown.

"Do you mean to say he proposed that, merely as a way out of the difficulty?"

"Well, more or less. I don't say he isn't attracted by the pretty face of her, as much as his cousin was; privately I think he is, but I don't really know. Anyhow, it certainly would be a very good solution; but it was tactless of him to suggest it with David at the foot of the gallows, poor boy."

"She didn't tell me that," murmured Gimblet.

At that moment Juliet came into the room, and they talked of other things.

"I hear the post is gone," Gimblet said presently.

"I particularly wanted to catch it. I suppose there is no means of posting a letter now?"

The last train had gone south by that time, however, so there was nothing to be done till the next day.

He retired again to his room and gave himself up to his correspondence.

First a long letter to Macross in Glasgow, begging for the loan of prints of the photographs taken by the police during their visit, together with any details they might see fit to impart as to their observations and conclusions. "I have arrived so late on the scene that you have left me nothing to do," he wrote deceitfully. "But for the interest of the case I should like to have a look at the photographs."

He did not expect to get much help from Macross.

Then he took from his pocket the pill-box in which he had stored the dust so carefully collected in the gunroom. He wrapped it carefully in paper, and addressed the small parcel to an expert analyst in Edinburgh. He wrote one more letter, and then went downstairs again.

The dressing-bell sounded as he opened his door, and at the foot of the staircase he met the two ladies on their way to dress.

"Dinner is at eight, Mr. Gimblet," Lady Ruth told him.

"I was just coming to find you," Gimblet answered her. "I want to ask if you would mind my not coming down? I am subject to very bad headaches after a long journey; and, as I want particularly to be up early to-morrow, I think the best thing I can do is to go straight to bed and sleep it off. It is poor sort of behaviour for a detective, I am aware, but I hope you will forgive it."

"You must certainly go to bed if you feel inclined to," said Lady Ruth;

"but you will have some dinner in your room, will you not? They shall bring you up the menu."

"No, really, thanks, I shall be better without anything. I know how to treat these heads of mine by now, I assure you, and I won't have anything to eat till to-morrow morning. The only thing I need is quiet and sleep. If you will be so very kind as to give orders that I shall not be disturbed...."

"Of course, of course," said his hostess, full of concern. "And you must let me give you an excellent remedy for headaches. It was given me years ago by dear old Sir Ronald Tompkins, that famous specialist, you know, who always ordered every one to roll on the floor after meals, and I invariably keep a bottle by me."

And she hurried off to fetch it.

Gimblet accepted it gratefully, and as he passed a hand across his aching brow said he felt sure it would do him good.

Once again within his own room, however, the detective's headache seemed to have miraculously vanished, and he showed himself in no hurry to go to bed. Instead, having locked the door and drawn down the blind, he sat down in an arm-chair and gave himself up to reflection. Mentally he rehearsed the facts of the case as far as they were known to him, and was obliged to admit that he found several of them very puzzling.

There were other problems, too, not directly connected with the murder, of which he could not at present make head or tail. For instance, where was he to find the documents which he knew it was Lord Ashiel's wish he should take charge of. He had promised that he would do so, and the recollection of his failure to guard the first thing the dead peer had entrusted him with made him the more determined that he would carry out the remainder of his promise. But how was he to begin his search? He had so little to go on, and he dared not hint to anyone what he wished to find. Yet, if he delayed, it was possible that young Ashiel would come across the papers in his hunt for his uncle's will, and Gimblet felt there was danger in their falling into the hands of anyone but himself.

He took out his notebook and studied the dying words of his unfortunate client.

"Gimblet--the clock--eleven--steps." Or was it steppes?

Considering that he had lived in dread of a blow which should descend on him out of Russia, the last seemed the more likely.

There was the strange circumstance of the body's being found by the police in a position differing from that described by those who first saw it. Young Ashiel, Juliet and the butler all agreed that it had fallen forward on to the blotting-book in the middle of the table; but Mark had told him that on his return with the police the attitude had been changed. Had he been mistaken? Macross's photographs would show. But if

not, and the murdered man had really shifted his position, what did it prove? That they had been wrong in thinking him dead? The doctor's evidence was that the wound he had received must have been instantly fatal, or almost instantly. Then some one must have moved the body, and who but David knew where the key of the room had been put away? But why should David have moved him?

Then there was the letter which had come two days after the murder; the letter written in French and posted in Paris, but probably not written by a Frenchman, and so timed as to reach its destination too late. Was it intentionally delayed, or would Lord Ashiel's death come as an entire surprise to the writer? It certainly would, if the police were right, and Sir David Southern guilty of his uncle's death.

But was he guilty? Gimblet thought not.

These and other questions occupied the detective's mind so completely that half an hour passed like a flash, and it was only when the noise of the dinner-bell broke in upon his meditations that he roused himself and pulled out his watch. Then he sat upright, and listened.

His room was above the drawing-room, and he could hear Lady Ruth's clear, rather high voice mingling with the deep tones of a man's, in a confused, murmuring duet which after a few moments died away and was followed by the distant sound of a closing door.

It was not difficult to deduce from these sounds that Lord Ashiel had arrived, and that the little party of three had gone in to dinner.

It was half an hour more before Gimblet rose, and walked quietly over to the window. He drew the blind cautiously aside and looked out. Already the days were growing shorter, and the little house, embowered in trees, and shut in by a tall hill from the western sky, was nearly completely engulfed in darkness. Below him, on the right, he could just discern the top of the porch, and beyond it a faint glow of light rose from the window of the dining-room.

It did not need a very remarkable degree of activity to clamber from the window to the porch, and so down to the ground. To Gimblet it was as easy as going downstairs. In two minutes he was stealing away under the trees in the direction of Inverashiel Castle.

"The worst of this Highland air," he said to himself as he walked along, "is that it makes one so fearfully hungry, even here on the West Coast. I could have done very nicely with my dinner. But such is life. And it's lucky I am not entirely without provisions."

So saying, he took a box of chocolates from his pocket and began to demolish the contents.

CHAPTER XIII

By the time he reached the castle, the night was dark indeed. He approached it by the path along the burn, and felt his way cautiously up the steep zigzags of the hill, and past the servants' quarters, where a dog barked and gave him an uneasy minute till he found that it was tied up, and that the noise which issued from a brilliantly lighted window--which he guessed to be the servants' hall--did not cease or diminish on account of it.

There were no other lights to be seen, and he edged his way round to the front of the house, which loomed very black and mysterious against the liquid darkness of the moonless sky. A little wind had risen, and the sound of a million leaves rustling gently on the trees of the woods around was added to the distant murmur of the burn, so that the night seemed full of noises, and every bush alive and watching.

Keeping on the grass, and with every precaution of silence, Gimblet crept along till he thought he was outside the drawing-room.

It did not take him long to find the window he had left unlatched that afternoon, but it was an anxious moment till he made sure that no one had noticed it and that it was yet unfastened. If a careful housemaid had discovered it and shut it, he would have to begin housebreaking in earnest. Luckily it opened easily at his touch, and he lost no time in climbing in, though it was rather a tight squeeze through the narrow imitation Gothic mullions, and he was thankful there were no bars as in the library.

He had more than once during his career found himself obliged to enter other people's houses in this unceremonious, not to say burglarious fashion. But it was always an exciting experience; and his heart beat a trifle faster than usual as he stood motionless by the window, straining his ears for the sound of any movement on the part of the household. Nothing stirred, however, and by the help of an occasional gleam from his pocket electric torch Gimblet made his way to the door, and through the deserted house to the distant passage leading to the old tower. Once inside the library he breathed more freely, and when, after holding his breath for some minutes, he had made certain that the absolute silence of the place continued unbroken by any suspicion of noise, he felt safer still. His first act was to draw the curtains, and to fasten them together in the middle with a large safety-pin he had brought for the purpose. Then, secure from observation, he switched on his torch, placed it on the table with its back to the window, and set about what he had come to do.

As he had not failed to observe, earlier in the day, the book-lined walls of the library were broken, opposite the window, by a panelled alcove where a small table stood, beyond which, against the wall, was a very large and tall grandfather's clock of black and gold lacquer, in imitation of the Chinese designs so popular in the eighteenth century.

Among Lord Ashiel's last words, "The clock" had been uttered immediately after the detective's own name. No doubt they formed part of a message he wished to convey; and, though they might refer to any clock in or out of the house, it seemed to Gimblet worth while to begin his investigations with the one nearest at hand, and he turned his attention to it without loss of time.

Gimblet was a connoisseur of the antique, and a few minutes' examination proved to him that this was a genuine old clock, untouched by the restorer's hand, and in an excellent state of preservation. The works appeared all right as far as he could make out, but through the narrow half-moon of glass, so often inserted in the cases of old clocks for the purpose of displaying the pendulum, that article was not to be seen, and he found that it was missing from inside the case, as were also the weights, so that it was impossible to set it going. There was one odd thing about it, which the detective had already remarked: it was firmly fixed to the wall by large screws, and he thought that there must be some opening through the back into a receptacle contrived in the panelling behind it. The case was so large that he was able to get inside it, and examine inch by inch the wood of the interior, which was lacquered a plain black.

But his most careful tappings and testings could discover no hidden spring, nor, even by the help of the electric torch--which he passed all over the smooth surfaces of the walls--could he discern the slightest join or crack. Could there be a hiding place up among the wheels of the motionless works? His utmost endeavours could discover none. The clock was fully eight feet high, but with the help of a stool, which he put inside on the floor of the case, he was able to explore even the topmost corners. All to no purpose.

Presently he abandoned that field of research, replaced the stool whence he had taken it, and gave his attention to the surrounding walls. He examined each panel with the most painstaking care, but could find nothing. There was no sign of secret drawer or cupboard anywhere.

It was disappointing, and he drew back, baffled for the moment

"The clock--eleven--steps."

What was the connection between those broken words?

If eleven o'clock had anything to do with the answer to the riddle, it could not refer to this particular clock, which pointed unwaveringly to thirteen minutes past four. Could it be possible that at eleven there appeared some change in its countenance? Was it controlled by some invisible mechanism? Well, if so, he would witness the transformation, but such a solution did not seem likely. Was there no other meaning applicable to the words? He would try the last ones and assume that eleven steps from somewhere, the clock, probably, would bring him to the hiding-place where the precious papers had been deposited.

Placing his heel against the bottom of the black-and-gold case, he walked

forward for eleven paces, which brought him right into the bow of the window. Here he bent down, and, with the torch in one hand, and a small magnifying lens that he was never without in the other, searched the floor eagerly for some join in the boards, which should denote the edge of a trap-door or an opening of some sort.

He could find none.

Again and again he tried, till at last he had examined the whole flooring of the embrasure of the window.

No other part of the room was wide enough to allow him to take eleven steps, and he reluctantly came to the conclusion that he must be on the wrong tack.

There seemed no more to do but to wait till eleven should strike, in the faint hope that something would happen then; and Gimblet sat down in one of the large arm-chairs and prepared for an hour's lonely vigil. He put his lamp in his pocket and sat in the dark, for he had an uneasy feeling that Mark might return from the cottage and catch him pursuing his investigations in a way which might not appeal to the average householder. True, it seemed unlikely that anyone would come so late to that side of the castle; but one never knew, and the thought of being caught at his housebreaking added to the irritation produced by the failure of his search.

"The clock--eleven--stepped." What had Lord Ashiel been trying to say? Why in the world had he put off writing till so late? These and like questions Gimblet asked himself fretfully, as he waited, curled in a deep arm-chair among the black shapes of furniture which loomed around him, indefinite and almost invisible, even to eyes accustomed to the darkness, as his now were.

Suddenly he raised his head and listened, holding his breath in strained attention. He had caught the sound of distant footsteps.

In an instant he was up and had leapt to the window, where his fingers fumbled with the safety-pin that held the curtains together. No tell-tale mark of his presence must be left.

But where should he hide? The sounds were becoming more distinct every second; no escape seemed possible. There was no help for it, and he was bound to be discovered; he must put as good a face on it as he could contrive. The person approaching might, after all, not come into the library, but go back again along the passage. It might only be some one coming to see that the door to the garden was properly bolted.

These thoughts flashed through the detective's mind so quickly as to be practically simultaneous, and then almost at the same moment he realized that the footsteps did not come from the passage at all, but from under the room he was waiting in. In a flash he had grasped the full significance of this unexpected fact, and was tiptoeing across to the door.

The handle turned noiselessly in his fingers, thanks to the precaution he had taken of oiling it, and he slipped outside.

In the dark and empty passage he took to his heels and ran swiftly back to the drawing-room, nor paused till he was outside on the lawn once more. There he hung for an instant in the wind; bearings must be taken, the nearest way to the enclosed garden decided on, any dangerous reefs that lay on the way steered clear of. Then he was off again on the new tack. This led him round to the back of the holly hedge, and the arched opening by the gardeners' tool-shed.

He turned in under it and sped silently over the turf, till he found himself outside the door to the old tower. From the library window a narrow shaft of light was issuing out on to the flower-bed.

Gimblet took off his coat and threw it on to the bed. He put a foot upon one sleeve, and, stooping down, spread the other out in front of him as far as it would go. Then he stepped upon that one and twisted the coat round under him to repeat the process. In this way he arrived under the window without leaving any imprint of his boots upon the soft earth. Once there he raised himself cautiously and peered into the room.

By the writing-table, and so close to him that he could almost have touched her if they had not been separated by the glass, stood a young woman.

She held a little electric lantern, much like his own, in her left hand, while with the other she turned over the leaves of a bundle of papers. An open drawer in the writing-table betrayed whence they had been taken; and she was so entirely engrossed in what she was about that the detective felt little fear of being noticed by her, concealed as he was in the outer darkness.

He saw that she was short and slight, with a beautiful little head set gracefully upon her upright slender figure. Her expression was proud and self-contained, but the large dark eyes that glowed beneath long black lashes were in themselves striking evidence of a passionate nature sternly repressed, and an eloquent contradiction to the firm, tightly compressed lips. Here, thought Gimblet, was a nature which might pursue its object with cold and calculating tenacity, and then at the last moment let the prize slip through its fingers at some sudden call upon the emotions.

For the time being her thoughts were evidently fixed upon her present purpose, to the exclusion of all considerations such as might have been expected to obtrude themselves upon the mind of a young girl engaged in a nocturnal raid. The dark solitude, the lateness of the hour, the surreptitious manner of her entry into the room, all these, which might well have occasioned some degree of nervousness in the coolest of housebreakers, appeared to produce, in her, nothing of the sort. As calmly as if she were sitting by her own bedside, she examined the documents in Lord Ashiel's bureau, sorting and folding the contents of

one drawer after another as if it were the most commonplace thing in the world to go over other people's private papers in the dead of night.

And what was she looking for?

Gimblet felt no doubt on that subject. This could surely be no other than Julia, the adopted daughter of Countess Romaninov, whom Lord Ashiel had for so long supposed to be his daughter. In some way or other she must have discovered the problematic relationship, and now she was hunting for proof of her birth, or perhaps for the will which should deprive her of her inheritance. It was even possible that the dead peer had been mistaken, and that Julia was indeed his daughter and not unaware of the fact. But what was she doing here, and where did she come from? Surely Juliet had told him that all the guests had left the castle.

Gimblet had never seen her before; but, as he watched her slow deliberate movements and quick intelligent eyes, he had an odd feeling that they were already acquainted. She reminded him of some one; how, he couldn't say. Perhaps it was the features, perhaps merely the expression, but if they had never previously met, at least he must have seen some one she resembled. Rack his brains as he might, he could not remember who it was. He put the thought aside. Sooner or later the recollection would come to him.

The night was a warm one, and Gimblet felt no need for his coat, though he was a little uneasy lest his white shirt should show up against the dark background if she should chance to look out. Behind him the trees in the wood stirred noisily and untiringly in the wind, and from time to time an owl cried out of the gloom; but no sound from within the castle reached his ears throughout the long hour during which he stood watching while deftly and methodically the young lady in the library went about her business. He wondered if this girl, who stealthily, in the night, by the gleam of a pocket lantern, was engaged in such questionable employment, were unwarrantably ransacking the belongings of her former host, or believed herself to be exercising a daughter's right in going over the papers of a dead parent.

The time came when the last paper was examined, the last drawer quietly pushed back into its place; then, with every sign of disappointment, she slowly rose, and taking up her torch made the tour of the room as if debating whether she had not left some corner unexplored. But the library was scantily furnished, apart from the books that lined the walls, and though she drew more than one volume from its place, and thrust a hand into the back of the shelf, it was with a dispirited air. Soon, with a glance at her watch, she abandoned the search, and slowly and hesitatingly moved in the direction of the door and laid her fingers upon the handle.

She did not turn it, however, but stood irresolute, her eyes on the floor. After a moment of indecision, the detective saw her mouth compress firmly, and with a quick movement of the head, as if she were shaking herself free from some persistent and troublesome thought, she turned and walked deliberately towards the alcove at the end of the room.

"Now," thought Gimblet, "we shall see where the secret door is concealed."

Judge of his surprise and excitement, when the girl stopped before the tall case of the lacquered clock and, opening it, stepped inside and drew the door to behind her. For five minutes, with nose pressed to the pane of the window, the detective waited, expecting her to reappear; then an idea struck him, and he clapped his hand against his leg in his exasperation at not having guessed before.

He turned immediately, and using the same precautions as before made good his retreat, and returned by way of the drawing-room window to the library.

All was silent there, and the empty room displayed no sign of its nocturnal visitors. Gimblet did not hesitate. He went straight to the clock and pulled open the door. The black interior was as empty and bare as when he had previously examined it, but he betrayed neither astonishment nor doubt as to his next action.

Stooping down he ran his hand over the painted wooden flooring. As he expected, his fingers encountered a small knob in one of the corners, and he had no sooner pressed it when the whole bottom of the case fell suddenly away beneath his touch. As he stretched down the hand that held the electric torch, the light fell upon an open trap-door and the topmost step of a narrow flight of stairs, which descended into the thickness of the wall.

Gimblet stepped into the case, and lowered himself quickly through the hole at the bottom.

The stairs proved to be but a short flight, ending in a low passage, which wound away through the wall of the ancient building. The detective felt little doubt that it led to another concealed opening in some distant part of the castle. But he had other things to think of for the moment.

"The clock--eleven--steps." The meaning of Lord Ashiel's dying words was, he thought, plain enough now.

Running up the stairs again, he descended more slowly, counting the treads as he went.

There were fifteen.

Gimblet bent down and held his torch so that the light fell bright upon the eleventh step.

It presented identically the same appearance as the rest, the rough-hewn stone dipping slightly in the middle as if many feet had trodden it in the course of the centuries which had elapsed since it was first placed there, but in every respect the worn surface resembled those of the steps

above and below it, as far as Gimblet could see.

He tapped it, and it gave forth the same sound as its neighbours. Then he lowered the torch and ran its beams along the front of the step; high up, under the overhanging edge of the tread above it, it seemed as if there were a flaw or crack in the stone. He knocked upon it, and it gave back a different sound to the stone around it.

Clearly it was wood, not stone, though so cleverly painted to imitate its surroundings that it was a thousand to one against anyone ever noticing it; and yes, there was a little circular depression in the middle of it. Gimblet's thumb pressed heavily against the place, and immediately there was a click, and a long narrow drawer flew out.

In it lay a single sheet of paper, and Gimblet's fingers shook with excitement as he drew it forth.

A moment's pause while he perused the writing upon it, and then the exultation on his face dwindled away. He could perceive no meaning in these apparently random sentences.

"Remember that where there's a way there's a will. Face curiosity and take the bull by the horn."

Was this the cipher, of which he had never received the key? The papers he had hoped to find must be hidden elsewhere. No doubt in some place whose whereabouts was indicated, if he could only understand it, by the incomprehensible message he held.

He stared at it for some minutes in an endeavour to find the translation; then, reflecting that this was neither the time nor place for deciphering cryptograms, he placed it carefully in an inner pocket, and after a hasty exploration of the passage beyond which did not reveal anything interesting except from an archaeological point of view, he thoughtfully mounted to the room above.

Closing the trap-door, and making sure that everything in the library was left as he had found it, Gimblet made his exit from the castle in the same manner as he had entered it, and groped his silent way home through the darkness.

A convenient creeper made it easy to climb on to the porch of Lady Ruth's house, now wrapped in peaceful slumber; and so in at his own window once more. The noise of the wind, which had now freshened to the strength of half a gale, drowned any sound of his return, and he lost no time in getting to bed and to sleep. The puzzle must keep till to-morrow. It was one of Gimblet's rules to take proper rest when it was at all possible, for he knew that his work suffered if he came to it physically exhausted.

Gimblet was up early next morning, refreshed by a sound and dreamless sleep.

For two hours before breakfast he wrestled with the cryptic message on the sheet of paper, trying first one way and then another of solving the riddle it presented, but still finding no solution. He was silent and preoccupied during the morning meal, replying to inquiries as to his headache, alternately, with obvious inattention and exaggerated gratitude. Neither of the ladies spoke much, however, and his absent-mindedness passed almost unnoticed.

Lord Ashiel was to be buried that day. Before they left the dining-room sombre figures could be seen striding along the high road towards Inverashiel: inhabitants of the scattered villages, and people from the neighbouring estates, hurrying to show their respect to the dead peer for the last time.

The tragic circumstances of the murder had aroused great excitement all over the countryside, and a large gathering assembled at the little island at the head of the loch, where the McConachans had left their bones since the early days of the youth of the race.

From the surrounding glens, from distant hills and valleys, and even from far-away Edinburgh and Oban, came McConachans, to render their final tribute to the head of the clan. It was surprising to see how large was the muster; for the most part a company of tall, thin men, with lean faces and drooping wisps of moustache.

To a mournful dirge on the pipes, Ashiel was laid in his rocky grave, and the throng of black-garmented people was ferried back the way it had come. Gimblet, wrapped to the ears in a thick overcoat, and with a silk scarf wound high round his neck, shivered in the cold air, for the wind had veered to the north, and the first breath of the Arctic winter was already carried on it. The waters of the loch had turned a slaty black; little angry waves broke incessantly over its surface; and inky black clouds were gathering slowly on the distant horizon. It looked as if the fine weather were at an end; as if Nature herself were mourning angrily at the wanton destruction of her child. The pity and regret Gimblet had felt, as he stood by the murdered man's grave, suddenly turned to a feeling of rage, both with himself and with the victim of the crime.

Why in the world had he not managed to guard against a danger of whose imminence he had had full warning? And why in the name of everything that was imbecile had Lord Ashiel, who knew much better than anyone else how real the danger was, chosen to sit at a lighted window, and offer so tempting a target to his enemy?

Suddenly, in the midst of his musings, a sound fell on the detective's ear; a voice he had heard before, low and musical, and curiously resonant. He looked in the direction from which it came and saw two people standing together, a little apart, in the crowd of those waiting

at the water's edge for a craft to carry them ashore. There were only two or three boats; and, though the ghillies bent to their oars with a will, every one could not cross the narrow channel which divided the island from the mainland at one and the same time. A group had already formed on the beach of those who were not the first to get away, and among these were the two figures that had attracted Gimblet's attention.

They were two ladies, who stood watching the boats, which had landed their passengers and were now returning empty.

The nearest to him, a tall woman of ample proportions, was visibly affected by the ceremony she had just witnessed, and dabbed from time to time at her eyes with a handkerchief.

But it was her companion who interested him. She was short and slender; her slightness accentuated by the long dress of black cloth and the small plain hat of the same colour which she wore. A thick black veil hung down over her face and obscured it from his view, but about her general appearance there was something strangely familiar. In a moment Gimblet knew what it was, and where he had seen her before. He had caught sight, in her hand, of a little bag of striped black satin with purple pansies embroidered at intervals upon it. Just such a bag had lain upon the table of his flat in Whitehall a few weeks ago, on the day when its owner had stolen the envelope entrusted to him by Lord Ashiel.

"It is she," breathed the detective, "the widow!"

And for one wild moment he was on the point of accosting her and demanding his missing letter. Wiser counsels prevailed, however, and he moved away to the other side of the small group of mourners gathered on the stony beach.

When he ventured to look at her again, it was over the shoulder of a stalwart Highlander, whose large frame effectually concealed all of the little detective except his hat and eyes. A further surprise was in store for him. The lady had lifted her veil and displayed the features of the girl he had watched in the library on the preceding night.

Gimblet had seen enough. He turned away, and found Juliet at his elbow.

She would have passed him by, absorbed in her sorrow for the father she had found and lost in the space of one short hour, but he laid her hand upon her arm.

"Tell me," he begged, "who are those two ladies waiting for the boat?"

Juliet's eyes followed the direction of his own.

"Those," she said, "are Mrs. Clutsam and Miss Julia Romaninov."

"Ah," Gimblet murmured. "They were among your fellow-guests at the castle, weren't they?"

"Yes."

Juliet's reply was short and a little cold. She could not understand why the detective should choose this moment to question her on trivial details. It showed, she considered, a lamentable lack of tact, and involuntarily she resented it.

"But surely you told me that every one had left Inverashiel," persisted Gimblet, unabashed.

He seemed absurdly eager for the information. No doubt, Juliet reflected bitterly, he admired Julia. Most men would.

"Mrs. Clutsam lives in another small house of my father's, near here," she replied stiffly. "She asked Miss Romaninov to stay with her for a few days till she could arrange where to go to. This disaster naturally upset every one's plans."

"She has a beautiful face," said Gimblet. "Who would think--" he murmured, and stopped abruptly.

"Perhaps you would like me to introduce you?"

Juliet spoke with lofty indifference, but the dismay in Gimblet's tone as he answered disarmed her.

"On no account," he cried, "the last thing! Besides, for that matter," he added truthfully, "we have met before."

"Then you will have the pleasure of renewing your acquaintance," Juliet suggested mischievously. Gimblet had shown himself so genuinely aghast that her resentful suspicions had vanished.

"I expect to have an opportunity of doing so," he agreed seriously. "That young lady," he went on in a low, confidential tone, "played a trick on me that I find it hard to forgive. I look forward, with some satisfaction, to the day when the laugh will be on my side. I admit I ought to be above such paltry considerations, but, what would you? I don't think I am. But please don't mention my presence to her, or her friend. I imagine she has not so far heard of it."

"I won't if you don't like," said Juliet. "I don't suppose I shall see them to speak to. But why do you feel so sure she doesn't know you are here?"

"Oh, how should she?" Gimblet returned evasively. "I don't suppose my presence would appear worth commenting upon to anyone but yourself or Lord Ashiel, unless Lady Ruth should mention it."

"I don't think she will," said Juliet. "She said she could not speak to anyone to-day, and she and Mark have gone off together in his own boat. I said I would walk home."

"Won't you drive with me?" Gimblet suggested.

He had hired a "machine" from the distant village of Inverlegan to carry him to and from the funeral. But Juliet preferred to walk, finding in physical exercise the only relief she could obtain from the aching trouble that oppressed and sickened her.

Gimblet drove back alone to the cottage. He had much to occupy his thoughts.

Once back in his room he turned his mind to the writing on the sheet of paper.

"Remember that where there's a way there's a will. Face curiosity and take the bull by the horn."

The message, as Gimblet read it, was as puzzling as if it had been completely in cipher.

If certain of the words possessed some arbitrary meaning to which the key promised by Lord Ashiel would have furnished the solution, there seemed little hope of understanding the message until the key was found. The word "way," for instance, might stand for another that had been previously decided on, and if rightly construed probably indicated the place where the papers were concealed. "Will," "face," "curiosity," "bull" and "horn" were likely to represent other very different words, or perhaps even whole sentences.

Without the key it was hopeless to search along that line; such search must end, as it would begin, in conjecture only. He would see if anything more promising could be arrived at by taking the message as it was and assuming that all the words bore the meaning usually attributed to them. For more than an hour Gimblet racked his brains to read sense into the senseless phrases, and at the end of that time was no wiser than at the beginning.

"Where there's a way there's a will." Was it by accident or design that the order in which the words way and will were placed was different from the one commonly assigned to them? Had Lord Ashiel made a mistake in arranging the message? Or did the "will" refer to his will and testament? If so, why should he take so roundabout a way of designating it? Doubtless because something more important than the will was involved; indeed, if anything was clear, from the ambiguous sentence and the precaution that Ashiel had taken that though it fell into the hands of his enemies it should convey nothing to them, it was that he considered the mystification of the uninitiated a matter of transcendental importance. It was plain he contemplated the possibility of the Nihilists knowing where to look for his message; and at the thought Gimblet shifted uneasily in his chair, remembering his first encounter with their representative.

"Face curiosity and take the bull by the horn." Perhaps those words, as they stood, contained some underlying sense, which at present it was hard

to read in them. What it was, seemed impossible to guess. To take the bull by the horn, is a common enough expression, and might represent no more than a piece of advice to act boldly; on the whole that was not likely, for would anyone wind up such a carefully veiled communication with so trite and everyday a saying, or finish such an obscure message with so ordinary a sentiment?

"Face curiosity," however, was perhaps a direction how to proceed. The only trouble was to know what in the world it meant!

Whose curiosity was to be faced? The behaviour of members of a Nihilist society could hardly be said to be impelled by that motive. Gimblet could not see that anyone else had shown any symptom of it. Had "curiosity," then, some other meaning?

The detective, as has been said, was an amateur of the antique. When not at work, a great part of his time was passed in the neighbourhood of curiosity shops, and the merchandise they dealt in immediately occurred to him in connection with the word.

Did the dead man refer to some peculiarity of the ancient keep? Was there, perhaps, the figure or picture of a bull within the castle whose horn pointed to the ultimate place of concealment? It would have seemed, Gimblet thought, that the hidden receptacle in the secret stair was difficult enough to find; but the reason the papers were not placed in there was plain to him after a minute's reflection. It was doubtless because they were too bulky to be contained in the shallow drawer. At all events, there was certainly another hiding-place; and, on the whole, the best plan seemed to be to see if the castle could produce any curiosity that would offer a solution of the problem.

To the castle, accordingly, he went, and asked to see Lord Ashiel. He was shown into the smoking-room, where Mark was kneeling on the hearth-rug surrounded by piles of folded and docketed papers. The door of a small cupboard in the wall beside the fireplace stood open, revealing a row of deep shelves stacked with the same neat packets.

"Still hunting for the will, you see," he said, looking up as Gimblet entered, "I'm beginning to give up hope of finding it, but it's a mercy to have something to do these days."

"Rather a tedious job, isn't it?" said the detective, looking down at the musty tape-bound bundles.

"Well, it gives one rather a kink in the back after a time," Mark admitted. "But I shan't feel easy in my mind till I've looked through everything, and I'm getting a very useful idea of the estate accounts in the meantime. It is rather a long business, but I'm getting on with it, slow but sure. There are such a fearful lot."

"Are all these cupboards full of papers?" Gimblet asked, looking round him at the numerous little doors in the panelling.

"Stuffed with them, every blessed one of them," Mark replied rather gloomily. "And the worst of it is, I'm pretty certain they're nothing but these dusty old bills and letters. But there's nowhere else to look, and I know he kept nearly everything here."

Gimblet sauntered round the room, pulling open the drawers and peeping in at the piles of documents.

"What an accumulation!" he remarked. "None of these cupboards are locked, I see," he added.

"No, he never locked anything up," said Mark. "I've heard him boast he never used a key. Do you know, if one had time to read them, I believe some of these old letters might be rather amusing. It looked as if my grandfather and his fathers had kept every single one that ever was written to them. I've just come across one from Raeburn, the painter, and I saw another, a quarter of an hour ago, from Lord Clive."

"Really," said Gimblet eagerly, "which cupboard were they in? I should like to see them immensely some time."

"They were in this one," said Mark, pointing to the shelves opposite him.

Gimblet stood facing it, and looked hopefully round him in all directions for anything like a bull. There was nothing, however, to suggest such an animal, and he reflected that interesting though these old letters might be it would be going rather far to refer to them as curiosities. Suddenly an idea struck him.

"I suppose you haven't come across anything concerning a Papal Bull?" he inquired.

"No," said Mark, looking up in surprise. "It's not very likely I should, you know."

"No, I suppose not," said Gimblet. "Still, you old families did get hold of all sorts of odd things sometimes, and your uncle was a bit of a collector, wasn't he?"

"Uncle Douglas," said Mark, "not he! He didn't care a bit for that kind of thing. You can see in the drawing-room the sort of horrors he used to buy. He was thoroughly early Victorian in his tastes, and ought to have been born fifty years sooner than he was."

"Dear me," said Gimblet. "I don't know why I thought he was rather by way of being a connoisseur. Well, well, I mustn't waste any more time. I wanted to ask you if you would mind my going all over the house. I may see something suggestive. Who knows? At present I have only examined the library and your uncle's bedroom."

"By all means," said Mark. "Blanston will show you anything you want to see. Oh, by the by, you like to be alone, don't you? I was forgetting."

Well, go anywhere you like; and good luck to your hunting!"

On a writing-table in one of the bedrooms, Gimblet found a paper-weight in the bronze shape of a Spanish toro, head down, tail brandishing, a fine emblem of goaded rage. But there was nothing promising about the round mahogany table on which it stood: no drawer, secret or otherwise could all his measurings and tappings discover; the animal, when lifted up by the horn and dangled before the detective's critical eye, proclaimed itself modern and of no artistic merit. It was like a hundred others to be had in any Spanish town, and by no expanding of terms could it be considered a curiosity.

Except for this one more than doubtful find, he drew the whole house absolutely blank. There were very few specimens of ancient work in the castle, which like so many other old houses had been stripped of everything interesting it contained in the middle of the nineteenth century, and entirely refurnished and redecorated in the worst possible taste. With the exception of some family portraits, the lacquered clock in the library was the one genuine survival of the Victorian holocaust, and though Gimblet passed nearly half an hour in contemplating it he could not see any way of connecting it with a bull, nor was he a whit the wiser when he finally turned his back on it than he had been at the beginning.

CHAPTER XV

Blanston, to whom he appealed, could give no useful information. Yes, some of the plate was old, but that was all at the bank in London. Mrs. Haviland, his lordship's sister, had liked it on the table when his lordship entertained in his London house, and it had not been carried backwards and forwards to Scotland since her ladyship's death.

He knew of nothing resembling a bull in his lordship's possession, unless it was the picture of cows that hung in the drawing-room opposite the one of the dead stag.

Gimblet had already exhausted the possibilities of that highly varnished oil-painting, and he went forth from the house in a state of deep dejection.

As he descended the drive he heard his name called, and looking back perceived the short, sturdy figure of Lady Ruth hurrying down the road behind him.

"If you are going back to the cottage, Mr. Gimblet," she panted, "let us walk together. I ran after you when I saw your hat go past the window, for I couldn't stand those frowsty old papers of Mark's any longer."

Gimblet waited till she came up, still talking, although considerably out

of breath.

"We will go by the road, if you don't mind," she said, "the lochside is rather rough for me. I have been paying a visit of charity, and very hard work it is paying visits in the country when you don't keep a conveyance of any kind, and I really can't afford even a donkey. You see the Judge's income died with him, poor dear, in spite of those foolish sayings about not being able to take your money with you to the better land, where I am sure one would want it just as much as anywhere else, for the better life you lead, the more expensive it is. No one could be generous, or charitable, or unselfish, with nothing to give up or to give away. That's only common sense, and I always say that common sense is such a help when called upon to face problems of a religious kind.

"My uncle was a bishop and a very learned theologian, I assure you; but he always held that it was impious to apply plain common sense to matters so far above us, and that is why he and my poor husband were never on speaking terms; not from any fault of the Judge's, who had been trained to think about logic and all that kind of thing which is so useful to people at the Bar.

"But it takes all sorts to make a world, as he often used to say to himself, and if every one was exactly alike one would feel almost as solitary as if the whole earth was empty and void, while, as for virtues and good qualities, they would automatically cease to exist, so that a really good man would simply long to go to hell and have some opportunity to show his goodness. That always seemed very reasonable to me, but I am just telling you what my husband used to say, because I really don't know much about these things, and he was such a clever man, and what he said was always listened to with great interest and respect at the Old Bailey. If it hadn't been, of course he would have cleared the court.

"But as I was telling you, his money went with him, though I know he always meant to insure his life, which is such a boring thing to think of when a man has many calls on his purse. And so, I live, as you see, in a very quiet way up here, and sometimes get down to the South for a month or six weeks in the winter, where I have many kind friends. But I find the hills rather trying to my legs as time goes on, and I don't very often walk as far as I have to-day. Still charity, as they say, covers a multitude of miles, and I really thought it my duty to come and see how poor Mark was bearing up all alone at Inverashiel. I was afraid he would be terribly unhappy, poor boy, so soon after the funeral, and Juliet Byrne having refused him, and everything. Though of course he can't be pitied for inheriting Inverashiel, such a lovely place, is it not? And quantities of property in the coal district, you know, besides. He is really a very lucky young man."

"It is indeed a most beautiful country," Gimblet observed, as Lady Ruth's breath gave out completely, and she stopped by the roadside to regain it. He was deep in thought, and glad to escape the necessity of frequent speech.

"Yes," she said, as they moved slowly on, "I had a delightful walk here,

and found him much more cheerful than I had feared. It is such a good thing he has all those papers to look over. It is everything, at a time like this, to have an occupation. It is so dreadful to think of dear David with absolutely nothing to do in that horrid cell. I wonder if they allow him to smoke, or to keep a tame mouse, which I remember reading is such a comfort to prisoners. I do hope, Mr. Gimblet, that you will soon be able to get him out of it."

Before Gimblet could reply, the silence was broken by the rumble of wheels; and a farmer's cart came up behind them, driven by a thin man in a black coat, who had evidently attended the funeral earlier in the day. The road, at the point they had reached, was beginning to ascend; and the stout pony between the shafts slowed resolutely to a walk as he leant against the collar. The man lifted his hat as Lady Ruth wished him good day.

"I saw you at the funeral, Angus McConachan," she said. "A sad business. A terrible business." And she shook her head mournfully.

The farmer stopped the willing pony.

"That it is, my leddy," he assented. "It's a black day indeed, when the heed o' a clan is struck doon by are o' his ain bleed. It's a great peety that the lad would ha' forgot what he owed to his salt. But I'm thinkin' they'll be hangin' him afore the year's oot."

"Oh, Angus," cried Lady Ruth, in horrified tones, "don't talk in that dreadful way. I'm quite, quite sure Sir David never had any part in the thing. It's all a mistake, and this gentleman here is going to find out who really fired the shot."

"Well, I hope ye'll be richt, my leddy," was all the farmer would commit himself to, as he gathered up the reins. Then he hesitated, looking down on the hot, flushed countenance of the lady in the road beneath him. "If yer leddyship will be tackin' a seat in the machine," he hazarded, "it'll maybe save ye the trail up the brae."

Lady Ruth accepted the suggestion with great content. She was getting very tired, and was finding the walk more exhausting than she had bargained for. She lost no time in climbing up beside Angus, and the fat pony was induced to continue its reluctant progress.

Near the top of the hill the road forked into two branches, that which led to the right continuing parallel with the loch, whilst the other diverged over the hill towards Auchtermuchty, a town some fifteen miles distant. The stout pony unhesitatingly took the turning to the left.

The farmer looked at Lady Ruth inquiringly.

"Will ye get doon here, my leddy?" he asked; "or will ye drive on as far as the sheepfold? It will be shorter for ye tae walk doon fay there, by the burn and the Green Way."

"I should like to do that," said Lady Ruth, "if you don't mind taking me so far. Perhaps you would give Mr. Gimblet a lift too, now that we're on top of the hill?"

The man readily consented, and Gimblet, who was following on foot, was called and informed of the proposed change of route. He scrambled into the back of the cart and they rattled along the upper road, the stout pony no doubt wearing a very aggrieved expression under its blinkers.

When another mile had been traversed, they were put down at a place where a rough track led down across the moor by the side of an old stone sheepfold.

The cart jogged off to the sound of a chorus of thanks, and Lady Ruth and Gimblet started down the heather-grown path. They rounded the corners of the deserted fold, and walked on into the golden mist of sunset which spread in front of them, enveloping and dazzling. The clouds of the morning had rolled silently away to the horizon, the wind had dropped to a mere capful; and the midges were abroad in their hosts, rejoicing in the improvement in the weather.

"I don't believe it's going to rain after all," said Lady Ruth. "The sun looks rather too red, perhaps, to be quite safe, though it is supposed to be the shepherd's delight. I can only say that, if he was delighted with the result of some of the red sunsets we get up here, he'd be easily pleased, and for my part I'm never surprised at anything. These midges are past belief, aren't they?"

They were, Gimblet agreed heartily. He gathered a handful of fern and tried to keep them at bay, but they were persevering and ubiquitous. Soon the path led them away from the open moor, and into the wood of birches and young oaks which clung to the side of the hill. A little farther, and Gimblet heard the distant gurgling of a burn; presently they were picking their way between moss-covered boulders on the edge of a rocky gully. Great tufts of ferns dotted the steep pitch of the bank below; the stream that clattered among the stones at the bottom shone very cool and shadowy under the alders; and a clearing on the other side revealed, over the receding woods, the broken hill-tops of a blue horizon.

The path wound gradually downward to the waterside, and in a little while they crossed it by means of a row of stepping-stones over which Lady Ruth passed as boldly as her companion.

Another hundred yards of shade, and they came out into a long narrow glen, carpeted with short springy turf, and bordered, as by an avenue, with trees knee-deep in bracken. The rectangular shape and enclosed nature of the glade came as a surprise in the midst of the wild woodlands. The place had more the air of forming part of pleasure grounds near to the haunts of man, and the eye wandered instinctively in search of a house. The effect of artificiality was increased by a large piece of statuary representing a figure carved in stone and standing upon a high oblong pediment, which stood a little distance down the glen.

Gimblet did not repress his feeling of astonishment.

"What a strange place!" he exclaimed. "Who would have expected to find this lawn tucked away in the woods. Or is there a house somewhere at hand?"

"No," Lady Ruth answered, "there is nothing nearer than my cottage half a mile away; and this short grass and flat piece of ground are entirely natural. Nothing has been touched, except here and there a tree cut out to keep the borders straight. The late Lady Ashiel, the wife of my unfortunate cousin, was very fond of this place. Although it is farther, she always walked round by it when she came to see me at the cottage. That absurd statue was put up last year as a sort of memorial to her--a most unsuitable one to my mind, she being a chilly sort of woman, poor dear, who always shivered if she saw so much as a hen moulting. I'm sure it would distress her terribly if she knew that poor creature over there had to stand in the glen in all weathers, year in and year out, with only a rag to cover her. And a stone rag at that, which is a cold material at the best. Yes, this is only the beginning of a track which runs for miles across the hills to the South. It is so green that you can always make it out from the heights, and there are all sorts of legends about it. It is supposed to be the road over which the clans drove back the cattle they captured in the old days when they were always raiding each other. They have a name for it in the Gaelic, which means the Green Way."

"The Green Way," Gimblet repeated mechanically. For a moment his brain revolved with wild imaginings.

"Yes," repeated Lady Ruth. "Sometimes they call it 'The Way,' for short. It is a favourite place for picnics from Crianan. My cousin used to allow them to come here, and the place is generally made hideous with egg-shells and paper and old bottles. One of the gardeners comes and tidies things up once a week in the summer. People are so absolutely without consciences."

"Is there a bull here?" cried Gimblet. He was quivering with excitement.

"Goodness gracious, I hope not!" said Lady Ruth. "Do you see any cattle? I can't bear those long-horned Highlanders!"

"No," said Gimblet. "I thought perhaps--But what is the statue? The design, surely, is rather a strange one for the place."

"Most extraordinary," assented Lady Ruth. "He got it in Italy and had it sent the whole way by sea. It took all the king's horses and all the king's men to get it up here, I can tell you. And, as I say, nothing less apropos can one possibly imagine. That poor thin female with such very scanty clothing is hardly a cheerful object on a Scotch winter's day, and as for those little naked imps they would make anyone shiver, even in August."

They had drawn near the sculptured group. It consisted of the slightly draped figure of a girl, bending over an open box, or casket, from which

a crowd of small creatures, apparently, as Lady Ruth had said, imps or fairies, were scrambling and leaping forth.

Gimblet gazed at it intently, as if he had never seen a statue before. In a moment his face cleared and he turned to Lady Ruth with burning eyes.

"It is Pandora," he cried. "Curiosity! Pandora and her box. Is it not Pandora?"

Lady Ruth stared at him amazed.

"I believe it is," she said, "that or something of the sort. I'm not very well up in mythology."

"Of course it is," cried Gimblet. "Face curiosity! And here's the bull, or I'll eat my microscope," he added, advancing to the side of the group and laying a hand upon the pedestal.

Lady Ruth followed his gaze with some concern. She was beginning to doubt his sanity. But there, sure enough, beneath his pointing finger, she perceived a row of carved heads: the heads of bulls, garlanded in the Roman manner, and forming a kind of cornice round the top of the great rectangular stone stand.

Gimblet glanced to right and left, up the glen and down it. There was no one to be seen. The sun had fallen by this time beneath the rim of the hills; a greyness of twilight was spread over the whole scene, and under the trees the dusk of night was already silently ousting the day. He turned once more to Lady Ruth.

"Lady Ruth," he said, "can you keep a secret?"

"My husband trusted me," she replied. "He was judicious as well as judicial."

"I am sure I may follow his example," Gimblet said, after looking at her fixedly for a moment. "So I will tell you that I believe I am on the point of discovering Lord Ashiel's missing will--and not that alone. Somewhere, concealed probably within a few feet of where we are standing, we may hope to find other and far more important documents, involving, perhaps, not only the welfare of one or two individuals but that of kings and nations. Apart from that, and to speak of what most immediately concerns us at present, I am convinced that within this stone will be found the true clue to the author of the murder."

"You don't say so," gasped Lady Ruth, her round eyes rounder than ever.

"I found some directions in the handwriting of the murdered man," went on Gimblet, "which I could not understand at first. But their meaning is plain enough now. 'Take the bull by the horn,' he says. Well, here are the bulls, and I shall soon know which is the horn."

He walked round to the front of the statue, so that he faced the stooping figure of Pandora, and laid his hand upon one of the curved and projecting horns of the left-hand bull. Nothing happened, and he tried the next. There were seven heads in all along the face of the great block, and he tested six of them without perceiving anything unusual. Was it possible that he was mistaken, and that, after all, the words of the message did not refer to the statue?

When he grasped the first horn of the last head, the hand that did so was shaking with excitement and suspense. It seemed, like the rest, to possess no attribute other than mere decoration. And yet, and yet--surely he had missed some vital point. He would go over them again. There remained, however, the last horn, and as he took hold of it with a premonitory dread of disappointment, he felt that it was loose in its socket, and that he could by an effort turn it completely over. With a triumphant cry he twisted it round, and at the same moment Lady Ruth started back with an exclamation of alarm.

She was standing where he had left her, and was nearly knocked down by the great slab of stone which, as Gimblet turned the horn of the bull, swung sharply out from the end of the pediment, till it hung like a door invitingly open and disclosing a hollow chamber within the stone.

Within the opening, on the floor at the far end, stood a large tin despatch-box.

The door was a good eighteen inches wide; plenty of room for Gimblet to climb in, swollen with exultation though he might be. In less than three seconds he had scrambled through the aperture and was stooping over the box. It seemed to be locked, but a key lay on the top of the lid. He lost no time in inserting it, and in a moment threw open the case and saw that it was full of papers.

Suddenly there was another cry from Lady Ruth as, for no apparent cause and without the slightest warning, the stone door slammed itself back into position, and he was left a prisoner in the total darkness of the vault. He groped his way to the doorway and pushed against it with all his strength. He might as well have tried to move the side of a mountain. But, after an interval long enough for him to have time to become seriously uneasy, the door flew open again, and the agitated countenance of Lady Ruth welcomed him to the outside world.

"Do get out quick," she cried. "If it does it again while you're half in and half out, you'll be cracked in two as neatly as a walnut."

Gimblet hurried out, clutching the precious box. No sooner was he safely standing on the turf than the door shut again with a violence that gave Pandora the appearance of shaking with convulsions of silent merriment.

"I wasn't sure how it opened," said Lady Ruth, "but I tried all the horns and got it right at last. How lucky I was with you!"

"Yes, indeed," said Gimblet. "I am very thankful you were."

They twisted the horn again, and stood together to watch the recurring phenomenon of the closing door.

"It must be worked by clockwork," the detective said, and taking out his watch he timed the interval that elapsed between the opening and shutting. "It stays open for thirty seconds," he remarked after two or three experiments. "No doubt the mechanism is concealed in the thickness of the stone. At all events it seems to be in good working order."

Squatting on the grass, he opened the tin box, and examined the papers with which it was filled. A glance showed him that they were what he expected, and he replaced the box where he had found it, while Lady Ruth manipulated the horn of the bull.

"I have no right to the papers," he explained to her, as they walked homeward in the gathering dusk. "It would be more satisfactory if a magistrate were present at the official opening of the statue, and I will see what can be done about that to-morrow. In the meantime, and considering that we have been interfering with other people's property, I shall be much obliged if you will keep our discovery secret."

And talking in low, earnest tones, he explained to her more fully all that was likely to be implied by the papers they had unearthed.

CHAPTER XVI

With her white paint and her scarlet smokestack, the *Inverashiel*--one of the two small steamers that during the summer months plied up and down the loch, and incidentally carried on communication between Inverashiel and Crianan--was a picturesque addition to the landscape, as she approached the wooden landing-stage that stood half a mile below the promontory on which the castle was built. It was the morning of Friday, the day following the funeral, and clouds were settling slowly down on to the tops and shoulders of the hills in spite of the brilliant sunset of the previous evening. The loch lay dark and still, its surface wore an oily, treacherous look; every detail of the *Inverashiel's* tub-like shape was reflected and beautifully distorted in the water, which broke in long low waves from her bows as she swerved round to come alongside the pier.

As the few passengers who were waiting for her crossed the short gangway, a shower burst over the loch and in a few minutes had driven every one into the little cabin, except the two or three men who constituted the officers and crew of the steamer. One of these was in the act of slackening the rope by which the boat had been warped alongside, when a running, gesticulating figure appeared in the distance, shouting to them to wait for him.

Waited for accordingly he was; and in a few minutes Gimblet, rather out of breath after his run, hurried on board, and with a word of apology and thanks to the obliging skipper turned, like the other passengers, towards the shelter of the cabin.

With his hand on the knob of the door he hesitated. Through the glass top he had just caught sight of a figure that seemed familiar. He had seen that tweed before; the short girl with her back to him was wearing the dress in which he had seen her on the Wednesday night, searching among Lord Ashiel's papers in the library at the castle. It was Julia Romaninov beyond a doubt, and Gimblet drew back quickly and took up his position behind the funnels on the after-deck. In spite of the rain he remained there until the boat reached Crianan, leaning against the rail with his collar turned up and his soft felt hat pulled down over his ears, so that little of him was visible except the tip of his nose.

His mind, always active, was busier than usual as he watched the ripples roll away in endless succession from the sides of the _Inverashiel_--which looked so strangely less white on closer inspection--or followed the smooth soaring movements of the gulls that swooped and circled around her, as she puffed and panted on her way across the black, taciturn waters.

As they drew near to Crianan he concealed himself still more carefully behind a pile of crates, and not till Miss Romaninov had left the steamer did he emerge from his hiding-place and step warily off the boat.

The young lady was still in sight, making her way up the steep pitch of the main street, and the detective followed her discreetly, loitering before shop windows, as if fascinated by the display of Scottish homespuns, or samples of Royal Stewart tartan, and taking an extraordinary interest in fishing-tackle and trout-flies.

But, though the girl looked back more than once, the little man in the ulster who was so intent on picking his way between the puddles did not apparently provide her with any food for suspicion; and she made no attempt to see who was so carefully sheltered beneath the umbrella he carried.

At last they left: the cobble-stones of the little town and emerged upon the high road, which here ran across the open moorland.

It was difficult now to continue the pursuit unobserved: and Gimblet became absorbed in the contemplation of an enormous cairngorm, which was masquerading as an article of personal adornment in the window of the last outlying shop.

From this position--not without its embarrassments, since a couple of barefooted children came instantly to the door, where they stood and stared at him unblinkingly--he saw the Russian advancing at a rapid pace across the moor; and, look where he would, could perceive no means of keeping up with her unobserved upon the bare side of the hill.

Just as he decided that the distance separating them had increased to an extent which warranted his continuing the chase, he joyfully saw her slacken her pace, and at the same moment a man, who must have been sitting behind a boulder beside the road, rose to his feet out of the heather, and came forward to meet her. For ten long minutes they stood talking, driving poor Gimblet to the desperate expedient of entering the shop and demanding a closer acquaintance with the cairngorm. It is humiliating to relate that he recoiled before it when it was placed in his hand, and nearly fled again into the road. However, he pulled himself together and held the proud proprietress, a gaunt, grey-haired woman with knitting-needles ever clicking in her dexterous hands, in conversation upon the theme of its unique beauties until the subject was exhausted to the point of collapse.

Every other minute he must stroll to the door and take a look up and down the road. A friend, he explained, had promised to meet him in that place; and though the shopwoman plainly doubted his veracity, and kept a sharp eye that he did not take to his heels with the cairngorm, she did not go so far as to suggest his removing himself from the zone of temptation.

At last, when for the twentieth time he put his nose round the doorpost, he saw that the pair had separated, and were walking in opposite directions, the girl continuing on her way, while the man returned to the town. He was, indeed, not a hundred yards off.

Gimblet plunged once more into the shop, and fastened upon some pencils with a zeal not very convincing after his disappointing vacillation over the brooch. The gaunt woman cheered up, however, when he bought the first seventeen she offered him, and, the stock being exhausted, finished by purchasing a piece of india-rubber, a stylographic pen, and a penny paper of pins, which she pressed upon him as particularly suited to his needs and charged him fourpence for.

By the time he issued forth into the open air, his pockets full of packages, the stranger had passed the shop and was turning the corner of the next house. To him, now, Gimblet devoted his powers of shadowing.

There was no great difficulty about it. The man walked straight before him, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and as he strode along the wet roads Gimblet noted with satisfaction the long, narrow, pointed footprints that were deeply impressed in the muddy places. He had no doubt they were the same as those he had noticed on the beach on the day of his arrival at Inverashiel.

The stranger turned into the Crianan Hotel, which stands on the lake front, fifty yards from the landing-place of the loch steamers. Gimblet passed the door without pausing and went down to the loch, where he mingled with the boatmen and loafers who congregated by the waterside.

He kept, however, a strict eye on the door of the hotel, and after a quarter of an hour saw the object of his attentions emerge with fishing-rod and basket, and cross the road directly towards him. Gimblet had not been able to see his face before, but now he had a good look as

he passed close beside him.

He was a tall, fair man, evidently a foreigner, but with nothing very striking about his appearance. A pointed yellow beard hid the lower part of his face, and, for the rest, his nose was short, his eyes blue and close together, and his forehead high and narrow. He looked closely at Gimblet as he went by, and for a moment the eyes of the two men met, both equally inscrutable and unflinching; then the stranger glanced aside and strode on to where a small boat lay moored. The detective turned his back while the fair man got in and pushed off into the loch.

"Gentleman going fishing?" he remarked to a man who lounged hard by upon the causeway.

"He's axtra fond o' the feeshin'," was the reply, "for a' that he's a foreign shentleman."

Waiting till the boat had become a distant speck on the face of the waters, Gimblet made his way into the inn and entered into conversation with the landlord, on the pretext of engaging rooms for a friend. The landlord was sorry, but the house was full.

"If ye wanted them in a fortnicht's time," he said, "ye could hae the hale hotel; but tae the end o' the holidays we're foll up. Folks tak' their rooms a month in advance; they come here for the fishin' on the loch, and because my hoose is the maist comfortable in the Hielands."

"Indeed, I can well believe that," Gimblet assured him. "I suppose you get a lot of tourists passing through, though, Americans, for instance?"

"We hardly ever hae a room tae tak' them in. No, I seldom hae an American bidin' here; they maistly gang doon the loch," said the innkeeper.

"I thought," said Gimblet, "that was a foreign-looking man whom I saw a little while ago, coming out of the hotel."

"We hae ae gintleman bidin' here wha belongs tae foreign pairts," the landlord admitted. "A Polish gintleman, he is, Count Pretovsky, a vary nice gintleman. I couldna just cae him a tourist. He's vary keen on the fishin' and was up here for it last year as well. He has his ain boat and is aye on the water trailin' aefter the salmon."

"A great many sporting foreigners come to our island nowadays," Gimblet remarked. "Does he get many fish?"

"Oh, it's a grand place for salmon," said the inn-keeper with obvious pride. "And there's troots tac. And pike, mair's the peety," he added.

"Dear me," said Gimblet, "just what my friend wants. I'm sorry you can't take him in. I must tell him to write in good time next year if he wants a room."

As he parted from the landlord upon the doorstep of the Crianan Hotel,

the Rob Roy--the second of the two loch steamers--was edging away from the pier, under a cloud of black smoke from her funnel. The rain had stopped; the passengers were scattered on the deck, and in the bows of the vessel the detective caught sight of Julia Romaninov's tweed-clad form. She was leaning against the rail, and gazing at a distant part of the loch where a black speck, which might represent a rowing boat, could faintly be discerned. She had come back, then, from her moorland walk. It was as Gimblet had expected; and, though he chafed at the delay, he regretted less than he would have otherwise that he could not catch the Rob Roy.

The Inverashiel would be due on her homeward trip in a couple of hours' time, and meanwhile he had other business that must be attended to.

He went first to the post office, where he registered and posted to Scotland Yard a packet he had brought with him. Then, after asking his way of the sociable landlord of the hotel, he proceeded to the police station, a single-storied stone building standing at the end of a side street.

Here he made himself known to the inspector, and imparted information which made that personage open his eyes considerably wider than was his custom.

"If you will bring one of your men, and come with me yourself," said Gimblet, at the conclusion of the interview, "I think I shall be able to convince you that a mistake has been made. In the meantime there will be no harm done by a watch being kept on the foreign gentleman who is at this moment trolling for salmon on the loch."

The inspector agreed; and when the Inverashiel started, an hour later, on her voyage down the loch, she carried the two policemen on her deck, as well as the most notorious detective she was ever likely to have the privilege of conveying.

It was nearly three o'clock when they landed on the Inverashiel pier.

The weather, which for the last few hours had looked like clearing, had now turned definitely to rain; clouds had descended on the hills, and the trees in the valleys stooped and dripped in the saturated, mist-laden air. Gimblet conducted the men to the cottage, where Lady Ruth anxiously awaited them.

"If you don't mind their staying here," he suggested to her, "while I go up to the castle and consult Lord Ashiel about a magistrate, it will be most convenient, on account of the distance."

"By all means," said Lady Ruth. "I feel safer with them. I expect you will find Miss Byrne up there. She has not come in to lunch, and I think she probably met Mark and went to lunch at the castle. She ought to know better than to go to lunch alone with a young man, and I am just wondering if she has changed her mind and accepted him after all. Girls are kittle cattle, but I've got quite fond of that one, and I hope she's

not forgotten poor David so soon. I really am feeling anxious about her."

"I daresay she has only walked farther than she intended," said Gimblet, "or perhaps she came to a burn or some place she couldn't get over, and has had to go round a mile or two. Depend on it, that's what's happened. But I promise you that if she is at the castle I will bring her back when I return."

CHAPTER XVII

Behind the shrubberies, which lay at the back of the holly hedge that surrounded the little enclosed garden outside the library, beyond the end of the battlements, and reached by a disused footpath, a great tree stood upon the edge of the steep hillside and thrust its sweeping branches over the void.

Its trunk was grey and moss-grown; moss carpeted the ground between its protruding roots, but the bracken and heather held back, and left a half-circle beneath it, untenanted by their kind. It would seem that all vegetation fears to venture beneath the shade of the beech; and for the most part it stands solitary, shunned by other growing things except moss, which creeps undaunted where its more vigorous brothers lack the courage to establish themselves.

Here came Juliet that morning.

A week ago, David Southern had shown her the path to the tree. It had been a favourite haunt of his when he was a boy, he told her. It was a private chamber to which he resorted on the rare occasions when he was disposed to solitude; when something had gone wrong with his world he had been used to retire there with his dog, or, more seldom, a book. There he had been accustomed to lie, his back supported by the tree, and hold forth to the dog upon the troubles and difficulties of life and the general crookedness of things; or, if a book were his companion, he would gaze out, between the pages, at distant Crianan clinging faintly to the knees of Ben Ghusy, and watch the swift change of passing cloud and hanging curtain of mist upon the faces of the hills and loch.

It had been a place all his own; secret from every one, even from Mark, his companion during all those holidays that he had spent at Inverashiel. Somehow, David told Juliet--and it was a confidence he had seldom before imparted to anyone--he had never quite managed to hit it off with Mark. He couldn't say why, exactly. No doubt it was his own fault; but there was no accounting for one's likes and dislikes.

And with quick regret at having betrayed his carefully suppressed feelings in regard to his cousin, David had laughed apologetically, and spoken of other things.

Here, then, just as the steamer _Rob Roy_ was drawing close to the wooden landing-stage at the edge of the loch, with Julia Romaninov still standing in the bows; here, because she had once been to this place with him, because without her he had so often sat upon these mossy roots, came Juliet to dream of her love.

Like him, she seated herself against the tree trunk at the giddy brink of the precipitous rock; like him, her eyes rested on the smooth waters below her, or on the far-away misty distance where Crianan slumbered; but, unlike him, her eyes, as they looked, were filled with tears. Where was he now? Oh, David, poor unjustly treated David! In what narrow cell, lighted only by a high, iron-barred window--for so the scene shaped itself in her mind--with uncovered floor of stone, bare walls and a bench to lie on, was the man she loved wearing away his days under the burden of so frightful an accusation?

For the thousandth time Juliet's blood boiled within her at the thought, and she grew hot with anger and indignant scorn. That anyone should have dared to suspect him! Why were such fools, such wicked, evil-working imbeciles as the police allowed to exist for one moment upon the face of the globe? But no doubt they had some hidden motive in arresting him, for it was quite incredible that they really imagined he had committed this appalling crime. She could not understand their motive, to be sure, but without doubt there must have been some reason which was not clear to her.

Oh, David, David! Was he thinking of her, as she was thinking of him? Did he know, by instinct, that she would be doing all that could be done to bring about his release? But was she? Again her mind was filled with the disquieting question, was there nothing that might be done, that she was leaving undone? Had she forgotten something, neglected something? She was sure Gimblet did not believe David to be guilty, but was he certain of being able to prove his innocence? He did not seem to have discovered much at present.

Suddenly, in the midst of her distress, she smiled to herself.

At least Miss Tarver had shown herself in her true colours, and was no more to be considered. Juliet felt that she could almost forgive her for her readiness to believe the worst. It was dreadful, yes, and shameful that anyone else should think for a moment that David could be capable of such a deed, but in Miss Tarver, perhaps, the thought had not been inexcusable. On the whole, it was so nice of her to break the engagement that she might be forgiven the ridiculous reason she had advanced for doing it. Of course, Juliet assured herself, it was a mere pretext, because _no_ one could possibly believe it. And in this manner she continued to reiterate her conviction that the suspicions entertained of her lover were all assumed for some darkly obscure purpose.

So the morning wore away. A shower or two passed down the valley, but under the thick tent of the beech leaves she scarcely felt it. She was, besides, dressed for bad weather; and the grey and mournful face of the day was in harmony with her mood.

There was something comforting in this high perch. She seemed more aloof from the troubles and despair of the last few days than she had imagined possible. There was a calm, a remoteness, about the grey mountains, disappearing and reappearing from behind their screen of cloud but unchanged and unmoved by what went on around and among them, that was in some way reassuring.

The burn that ran at the bottom of the hill on which she sat, hurrying down to the loch in such turbulent foaming haste, she was able to compare, with a sad smile, to herself. The loch, she thought, was wide and impassive as justice, which did not allow itself to be influenced by the emotions. The burn would get down just the same without so much turmoil and fuss; and she would see David's name cleared, equally surely, if she waited calmly on events, instead of burning her heart out in hopeless impatience and anxiety.

As she gazed, with some such thoughts as these, down to the stream that splashed on its way below her, her attention was caught by a movement in the bushes half-way down the steep slope at the top of which she was sitting.

The day was windless and no leaf moved on any tree. There must be some animal among the shrubs that covered the embankment, some large animal, since its movements caused so much commotion; for, as she watched, first one bush and then another stirred and bent and was shaken as if by something thrusting its way through the dense growth.

What could it be? A sheep, perhaps; there were many of them on the hillsides. This must be one that had strayed far from the rest. And yet would a sheep make so much stir? Juliet drew back a little behind the trunk of the beech-tree. Could it be a deer? She could not hear any sound of the creature's advance, for the air was full of the clamour of the burn, but she could trace the direction of its progress by shaking leaves and swinging boughs. It seemed to be gradually mounting the slope.

Suddenly a head emerged from the waving mass of a rhododendron, and with astonishment Juliet saw that it was that of Julia Romaninov.

Her first impulse was to lean forward and call her, but as she did so the cry died unheard upon her lips. For the manner of Julia's advance struck her as very odd. The girl was bending nearly double, and moving with a caution that seemed very strange and unnecessary. What was the matter? Was she stalking something? Crouching as she was in the bushes, she would not be seen by anyone on the path below. Did she not want to be seen? It looked more and more like it. But why in the world should Julia creep along as if she feared to be observed? Where was she going, and why?

Suddenly Juliet came to a quick decision: she would find out what Julia Romaninov was doing.

She backed hurriedly into the bracken, and made her way slowly and cautiously around the clearing under the beech-tree to the edge of the

hill again, keeping under cover of the fern and heather. When she peered over, Julia had disappeared from view beneath the rhododendrons.

For a minute Juliet's eyes searched the side of the slope below. Then she drew back her head quickly, for she had caught sight of another bush shaking uneasily a little way beyond the gap in which she had had her first glimpse of the cause of the disturbance. Cowering low in the bracken she crept along the top, keeping a foot or two from the edge, where the rock fell nearly perpendicularly for a few yards before its angle changed to the comparatively gradual, though actually steep slope of the hill which Julia was climbing.

From time to time she looked cautiously between clumps of fern or heath, to make sure that she was keeping level with her unconscious quarry.

The front of the hill swung round in a bold curve till it reached the castle; and it soon became evident that, if both girls continued to advance along the lines they were following, they would converge at a point where the end of the battlemented wall met the great holly hedge that formed two sides of the garden enclosure.

Juliet perceived this when she was not more than a dozen yards from the corner, and dropped at full length to the soft ground, at a spot where she could see between the stalks and under the leaves, and yet herself remain concealed. She had not long to wait. In a minute, Julia's face appeared over the brow of the hill. She pulled herself up by a young fir sapling that hung over the brink, and stood for a moment, flushed and panting after her long climb. She was dressed in a greenish tweed, which blended with the woodland surroundings, and her shoulder was turned to the place where Juliet lay wondering whether she would be discovered.

Fronting them, the end of the little turret, with which the wall of the old fortress now came to a sudden termination, could be seen rearing its grey stones above the dark glossy foliage of the hedge, which grew here with peculiar vigour and continued to the extreme edge of the cliff, and even farther.

What was Juliet's surprise to see Julia, when she had found her breath, and taken one quick look round as if to satisfy herself she was unobserved, suddenly cast herself down, in her turn, upon the damp earth, and inserting her head beneath the prickly barricade of the holly leaves, begin to crawl and wriggle forward until she had completely disappeared under it. What in the world could she be doing?

Minutes passed, and she did not reappear. Juliet waited, her nerves stretched in expectation, but nothing happened. Overhead little birds, tomtits and creepers, played about the bark of the fir-trees; a robin came and looked at her consideringly, with a bright sensible eye; from two hundred feet below, the murmur of the burn rose constant and insistent; but no other sound broke the stillness, nor was there any sign of human life upon the top of the cliff.

At last the girl could stand it no longer. Her patience was exhausted.

Curiosity urged her like a goad; and, if she had not much expectation of making any important discovery, she was at least determined to solve the mystery that now perplexed her.

Without more ado she got to her feet, and ran to the holly hedge. There, throwing herself down once more, she parted the leaves with a cautious hand, and followed the path taken by the Russian.

The hedge was old and very thick, more than three yards in width at this end of it. In the middle, the trunks of the trees that formed it rose in a close-growing, impassable barrier; but just opposite the place where Julia had vanished Juliet found that there was a gap, caused, perhaps, by the death in earlier days of one of the trees, or, as she afterwards thought more likely, by the intentional omission or destruction of one of the young plants. It was a narrow opening, but she managed to wriggle through it.

On the other side, progress was bounded by the wall, whose massive granite blocks presented a smooth unbroken surface. Where, then, had Julia gone? The branches did not grow low on this, as on the outer side of the hedge, and there was room to stand, though not to stand upright. Stooping uncomfortably, the girl looked about her, and saw in the soft brown earth the plain print of many footsteps, both going and coming, between the place where she crouched and the end of the wall. She looked behind her, and there were no marks. Clearly, Julia had gone to the end; but what then? The corner of the wall was at the very edge of the precipice; from what she remembered to have seen from below, the rock was too sheer to offer any foothold; besides why, having just climbed to the summit should anyone immediately descend again, and by such an extraordinary route? While these thoughts followed one another in her mind, Juliet had advanced along the track of the footsteps, and clinging tightly to the trunk of the last holly bush she leant forward and looked down.

As she thought, the descent was impossible: the rock fell away at her feet, sheer and smooth; there was no path there that a cat could take. It made her giddy to look, and she drew back hurriedly.

Where, then, could Julia have gone? Not to the left, that was certain, for then she would have emerged again into view. To the right? That seemed impossible. Still, Juliet leant forward again, and peered round the corner of the wall.

There, not more than a couple of feet away, was a small opening, less than eighteen inches wide by about a yard in height. Hidden by the overhanging end of the hedge, it would be invisible from below. Here was the road Julia had taken.

Juliet did not hesitate. She could reach the aperture easily, and it would have been the simplest thing in the world to climb into it, but for the yawning chasm beneath. Holding firmly to the friendly holly, and resisting, with an effort, the temptation to look down, she swung herself bravely over the edge and scrambled into the hole with a gasp of

relief. It was, after all, not very difficult. She found herself standing within the entrance of a narrow passage built into the thickness of the wall. Beside the opening through which she had come, a little door of oak, grey with age and strengthened with rusty bars and cross-pieces of iron, drooped upon its one remaining hinge. Two huge slabs of stone leaning near it, against the wall, showed how it had been the custom in former centuries to fortify the entrance still more effectively in time of danger.

Juliet did not wait to examine these fragments, interesting though they might be to archaeologists, but hurried down the passage as quickly as she could in the darkness that filled it, feeling her way with an outstretched hand upon the stones on either side. As her eyes became accustomed to the obscurity, she saw that though the way was dark it was yet not entirely so: a gloomy light penetrated at intervals through ivy-covered loopholes pierced in the thickness of the outer wall; and she imagined bygone McConachans pouring boiling oil or other hospitable greeting through those slits on to the heads of their neighbours. But surely, she reflected, no one would ever have attacked the castle from that side, where the precipice already offered an impregnable defence; the passage must have been used as a means of communication with the outer world, or, perhaps, as a last resort, for the purpose of escape by the beleaguered forces.

After fifty yards or so of comparatively easy progress, the shafts of twilight from the loopholes ceased to permeate the murky darkness in which she walked, and she was obliged to go more slowly, and to feel her way dubiously by the touch of hands and feet.

The floor appeared to her to be sloping away beneath her, and as she advanced the descent became more and more rapid, till she could hardly keep her feet. She went very gingerly, with a vague fear lest the path should stop unexpectedly, and she herself step into space.

Presently she found herself once more upon level ground, when another difficulty confronted her: the walls came suddenly to an end. Feeling cautiously about her in the darkness, she made out that she had come to a point where another passage crossed the one she was following, a sort of cross-road in this unknown country of shade and stone. Here, then, were three possible routes to take, and no means of knowing which of them Julia Romaninov had gone by.

After a little hesitation, she decided to keep straight on. It would at all events be easier to return if she did, and she would be less likely to make a mistake and lose her way. So on she stumbled; and who shall say that Fate had not a hand in this chance decision?

Though the distance she had traversed was inconsiderable, the darkness and uncertainty made it appear to her immense, and each moment she expected to come upon the Russian girl. At every other step she paused and listened, but no sound met her ears except a slight, regular, thudding noise, which she presently discovered, with something of a shock, to be the beating of her own heart. The sound of her progress was

almost inaudible. As the day was damp, she was wearing goloshes, and her small, rubber-shod feet fell upon the stone floor with a gentle patter that was scarcely perceptible.

At last she nearly fell over the first step of a flight of stairs.

She mounted them one by one with every precaution her fears could suggest. For by now the first enthusiasm of the chase had worn off, and the solitude and darkness of this strange place had worked upon her nerves till she was terrified of she knew not what, and ready to scream at a touch.

Already she bitterly regretted having started out upon this enterprise of spying. Why had she not gone and reported what she had seen to Mr. Gimblet? That surely would have been the obvious, the sensible course. It was, she reflected, a course still open to her; and in another moment she would have turned and taken it, but even as the thought crossed her mind she was aware that the darkness was sensibly decreased, and in another second she had risen into comparative daylight. As she stood still, debating what she should do, and taking in all that could now be distinguished of her surroundings, she saw that the stairs ended in an open trap-door, leading to a high, black-lined shaft like the inside of a chimney, in which, some two feet above the trap, an odd, narrow curve of glass acted as a window, and admitted a very small quantity of light. A streak of light seemed to come also from the wall beside it.

Juliet drew herself cautiously up, till her head was in the chimney, and her eyes level with the slip of glass.

With a sudden shock of surprise she saw that she was looking into the room which, above all others, she had so much cause to remember ever having entered.

It was, indeed, the library of the castle, and she was looking at it from the inside of that clock into which Gimblet had once before seen Julia Romaninov vanish.

The curtains were drawn in the room, but after the absolute blackness of the stone corridors the semi-dusk looked nearly as bright as full daylight to Juliet, and she had no difficulty in distinguishing that there was but one person in the library, and that person Julia.

She was standing by a bookshelf at the far end, near the window, and seemed to be methodically engaged in an examination of the books. Juliet saw her take out first one, then another, musty, leather-bound volume, shake it, turn over the leaves, and put it back in its place after groping with her hand at the back of the shelf. Plainly she was hunting for something. But for what? She had no business where she was, in any case, and Juliet's indignation gathered and swelled within her as she watched this unwarrantable intrusion.

She would confront the girl and ask her what she meant by such behaviour. But how to get into the library?

Looking about her, she saw that the streak of light in the wall beside her came through a perpendicular crack which might well be the edge of a little door.

She pushed gently and the wood yielded to her fingers.

CHAPTER XVIII

Later on in the afternoon, when Gimblet arrived at the castle, he was immediately shown into the presence of Lord Ashiel, who was pacing the smoking-room restlessly, a cigarette between his teeth. He looked pale and haggard, the strain of the last few days had evidently been too much for him.

Gimblet greeted him sympathetically.

"You have not found your uncle's will, I can see," he began, "and you are fretting at the idea of keeping his daughter out of her fortune. But set your mind at rest; we shall be able to put that right. Is she here, by the way?" he added, remembering Lady Ruth's anxiety.

"Here, of course not! What do you mean?" cried Mark, stopping suddenly in his walk.

"Well, I was sure she was not," Gimblet replied, "but I promised to ask. Lady Ruth is rather upset because Miss Byrne did not come in to lunch. I told her she had probably gone for a longer walk than had been her intention," he added soothingly, for Mark was looking at him with a disturbed expression.

He seemed relieved, however, by the detective's suggestion.

"Yes, no doubt, that would be the reason," he murmured, lighting a fresh cigarette, and throwing himself down in an easy-chair, with his hands clasped behind his head. "No, I haven't found any will, and there's not a corner left that I haven't turned inside out. I suppose he never really made it. Just talked about it, probably, as people are so fond of doing. And now I'm at a loose end; all alone in this big house with no one to speak to and nothing to do with myself. It's a beast of a day, or I should go out and try for a salmon, in self-defence. To-morrow I shall go South. And you, have you found out anything new about the murder yet?"

"I have found out one thing which you will be glad to hear," said Gimblet, "and that is the place where the missing will is concealed."

"What!" cried Mark, leaping to his feet. "Where is it? What does it say? Give it to me!"

"I haven't got it," Gimblet told him. "I don't know what it says, but I know where to look for it. It is in the statue your uncle put up on the track known as the Green Way. I have found a memorandum of his which sets the matter beyond a doubt."

And he related at length the story of the half-sheet of paper with the mysterious writing, and of how he had learnt by accident of the manner in which the statue fitted in with the obscure directions, omitting nothing except the fact that he had already acted on the information so far as to make certain of the actual existence of the tin box, and saying that he should prefer the papers to be brought to light in the presence of a magistrate.

"I believe there are other documents there besides the will," he said, without troubling to explain what excellent reasons he had for such a belief. "I understood from your uncle that there might be some of an almost international importance. In case any dispute should subsequently arise about them, I wish to have more than one reliable witness to their being found. Can you send a man over to the lodge at Glenkiquart, and ask General Tenby to come back with him. I am told that he is a magistrate."

Gimblet did not think it necessary to relate how he had obtained possession of the sheet of paper bearing the injunction to "face curiosity." His adventures on that night savoured too strongly of house-breaking to be drawn attention to.

"Your uncle must have posted it to me in London the day before he died," he said mendaciously. "It was forwarded here, and at first I could make neither head nor tail of it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Mark asked impatiently. "And yet," he added reflecting, "I might not have seen to what it referred. Yes, of course I will send over for General Tenby. He can't come for three or four hours, though, which will make it rather late. Are you sure we had not better open the thing sooner? The bull's horn at the south-east corner turns like a key, you say? Suppose some one else finds that out and makes off with whatever may be hidden there."

"I am absolutely sure we needn't fear anything of the sort, because I have the best of reasons for being positive that no one has the slightest inkling of the secret," Gimblet assured him. "There is a whole gang of scoundrels after the document of which your uncle told me, who are ready to spend any money, or risk any penalty, in order to obtain it. They will not be deterred even by having to pay for it with their lives. You may be quite sure that if anyone had suspected where it was concealed, it would not have been allowed to remain there, and we should find the cache empty. But we may safely argue that they have not found it, since in that case they certainly would not hang about the neighbourhood."

"Do you mean to say," cried Mark, "that you think there are any of these Nihilist people lurking about? That letter which came for Uncle Douglas--the letter from Paris--I guessed it meant something

of the sort."

"There is a foreigner staying at Crianan," said Gimblet, "whom I have every reason to suspect. More than that, there has been a Russian in your very midst who, I am afraid, you will be shocked to hear, is hand in glove with him."

"Whom do you mean?" exclaimed Mark, "not--not Julia Romaninov?" It seemed to the detective that he winced as he uttered the name of the girl. Silently Gimblet bowed his head, and for a minute the two men stood without a word. "Then," stammered Mark, "you think that she--that she--Oh," he cried, "I can hardly believe that!"

Gimblet did not reply, but after a few moments walked over to the writing-table and spread out a piece of notepaper. He kept his back turned towards the young man, who seemed thankful for an opportunity to recover his composure.

His face was still working nervously, however, when at length the detective turned and held out a pen towards him.

"Will you not write at once to General Tenby?" he suggested.

Mark sat down before the blotting-pad.

"He will be at home," he said mechanically. "This weather will have driven them in early if they have been shooting."

The note was written and dispatched by a groom on horseback, and then Gimblet bade an revoir to his host at the door of the castle.

"I will go back to the cottage," he said; "I have an accumulation of correspondence that absolutely must be attended to, and I do not think there is anything to be done up here before General Tenby comes. Once we have the Nihilist papers in our hands I have a little plan by which I think our birds may be trapped. Will you meet me at the cottage at half-past six? The General will have to pass it on the way to Inverashiel, and we can stop him as he goes by."

"It will be about seven o'clock, I expect," said Mark, "when he gets down from Glenkiquart. I'll be with you before he is. The Lord knows how I shall get through the time till he comes. I loathe writing letters, but this afternoon I'm dashed if I don't almost envy you and your correspondence."

"I know it is the waiting that tells on one," Gimblet said, his voice full of kindly sympathy. "What you want is to get right away from this place. Its associations must be horrible to you. No one could really be astonished if you never set foot in it again."

Mark laughed rather bitterly.

"That's just what I feel like," he said shortly. "My uncle killed; my

cousin arrested; my friend accused. Miss Byrne refusing to let me behave decently to her about the money. Oh well," he pulled himself up, and spoke in a more guarded tone, "one gets used to everything in time, no doubt, but just at present, I'm afraid, I am rather depressing company. See you later."

They went their ways, Gimblet going forth into the drenching rain which was now falling down the road, through the soaking woodlands to the cottage, where the Crianan policemen still smoked their pipes undisturbed. Lady Ruth met him at the gate, running down in her waterproof when she saw him approaching.

"Where is Juliet?" she cried. "Wasn't she at Inverashiel?"

"Hasn't she come back?" asked Gimblet, answering her question by another.

"No sign of her. What can have happened? Mr. Gimblet, I am really getting dreadfully anxious. She must have gone on to the hills and lost her way in the mist."

"She is sure to get back in time," Gimblet tried to reassure her, though he himself was beginning to wonder at the girl's absence. "Perhaps," he added, "she is at Mrs. Clutsam's. I daresay that's the truth of it."

"She can't be there," Lady Ruth answered. "Mrs. Clutsam told me she was going out all day, to-day, to visit her husband's sister who is staying somewhere twenty miles from here on the Oban road, and longing, of course, to hear all about the murder at first hand. Relations are so exacting, and if they are relations-in-law they become positive Shylocks. Juliet may have gone to the lodge though, all the same, and stayed to keep the Romaninov girl company."

She seemed to be satisfied with this explanation; and Gimblet had tea with her, and then went to write his letters.

Soon after six one of the policemen went down to the high road to lie in wait for General Tenby, and about twenty minutes past the hour wheels rattled on the gravel of the short carriage-drive, and the General drove up to the door. He was a tall, soldierly-looking man of between fifty and sixty, with a red face and a keen blue eye, and a precise, jerky manner.

"Ah, Lady Ruth! Glad to see you bearing up so well under these tragic circumstances," he said, shaking hands with that lady, who came to the door to welcome him. "Poor Ashiel ought to have had shutters to his windows. Dreadful mistake, no shutters: lets in draughts and colds in the head, if nothing worse. These old houses are all the same. No safety in them from anything. Young McConachan wrote me an urgent note to come over. Don't quite see what for, but here I am. Eh? What do you say? Oh, detective from London, is it? How d'ye do? Perhaps you can tell me what the programme is?"

"Young Lord Ashiel promised to meet us here at half-past six," Gimblet told him. "We expect to put our hands on some important documents, and I

was anxious you should be present."

"Quite unnecessary. Absolutely ridiculous. Still, here I am. May as well come along."

The General went on talking to Lady Ruth, but after a few minutes the inspector from Crianan sent in to ask if he could speak to him, and they retired together to Lady Ruth's little private sitting-room, where they remained closeted for some time. While the old soldier was listening to what the policeman had to tell him, Gimblet began to show signs of restlessness. He went to the door and looked about him. The weather was clearing, the clouds breaking and scudding fast before a wind which had arisen in the North; a tinge of blue showed here and there in the interstices between them, while a veil of mist that trailed after them shone faintly orange in the rays of the hidden sun.

Gimblet went back and sat down in the drawing-room with the Scotsman in his hand. He put it down after a few minutes, however, and began fidgeting about the room. Then he went and conferred with the second of the two policemen, and as he was talking to him the General and the inspector reappeared.

"I think," said Gimblet, coming towards them, "that we will not wait any longer for Lord Ashiel."

General Tenby, staring at him with rather a strange expression, nevertheless silently assented, and the four men started on their walk to the green way.

As they went up the glen a ray of sunshine emerged from between the flying clouds, and fell upon the statue at the end of the enclosed glade. Away to the right their eyes could follow the track of a distant shower; and as they went a rainbow curved across the sky, stretching from hill to hill like some great monumental arch set up for the celestial armies to march under on their return from the conquest of the earth.

"That statue," Gimblet remarked to the General, who walked beside him, "is a specimen of the worst modern Italian sculpture. The figure of Pandora is modelled like a sack of potatoes; the composition is weak and unsatisfactory; and the pediment on which the whole group is poised large enough to support three others of the same size."

The General grunted.

"I always understood that the late Lord Ashiel knew what he was about," he said stiffly. "He told me himself that it cost him a great deal of money."

Gimblet sighed. He could not help feeling that it was a pity Lord Ashiel had not earlier fallen into the habit of consulting him.

Still, he was bound to admit that though the stone group, regarded as a work of art, was altogether deplorable, the general effect of the

erection, in its rectangular setting of forest, was excellent. The whole scene was one of peaceful and romantic beauty. Poets might have sat themselves down in that moist and shining spot; and, forgetful of the possibilities of rheumatism, found their muse inspiring beyond the ordinary.

Gimblet was at heart something of a poet, but he felt no inclination to communicate the feelings which the place and hour aroused in him to any of his companions; and it was in a silence which had in it something dimly foreboding that the party drew near to the statue.

In silence, Gimblet approached the great block of stone and laid his hand upon the projecting horn of the bull. Equally silently the two policemen had taken up positions at the end of the pedestal; the General stood behind them, alert and interested.

After a swift glance, which took in all these details, Gimblet turned the horn round in its socket.

The hidden door swung open, and there was a sound of muttered exclamations from the police and a loud oath from the General. Gimblet sprang round the corner of the pedestal, and there, as he expected, cowering in the mouth of the disclosed cavity, and looking, in his fury of fear and mortification, for all the world like some trapped vermin, crouched Lord Ashiel, glaring at his liberators with a rage that was hardly sane.

Beyond him, on the floor at the back, they could see the tin dispatch box standing open and empty.

The two policemen, acting on instructions previously given them, made one simultaneous grab at the young man and dragged him into the open with several seconds to spare before the door slammed to again, in obedience to the invisible mechanism that controlled it. They set him on his legs on the wet turf, and stood, one on each side of him, a retaining hand still resting on either arm.

For a moment Mark gazed from the General to the detective, his eyes full of hatred. Then he controlled himself with an effort, and when he spoke it was with a forced lightness of manner.

"I have to thank you for letting me out," he said. "The air in there was getting terrible." He paused, and filled his lungs ostentatiously, but no one answered him. Losing something of his assumed calmness, he went on, uneasily: "I just thought I'd come along and see if there was any truth in Mr. Gimblet's story; and I was quite right to doubt it, since there isn't. He's not quite as clever as he thinks, for he was as positive as you like that my uncle's will was hidden here, but as a matter of fact it's not, as I was taking the trouble to make sure when that cursed statue shut me in. There's nothing in it of any sort except an empty tin box."

"There's nothing in it now," said Gimblet, speaking for the first time,

"because I had no doubt you meant to destroy the will if you found it, so I removed it to a safe place last night. As for the other papers, I have sent them to London, where they will be still safer. I knew you would give yourself away by coming here. That's why I told you the secret of the bull's horn."

Mark's face was dreadful to see. He made a menacing step forward as if he would throw himself upon the detective. But the strong right hands of Inspector Cameron and Police Constable Fraser tightened on his arms and restrained his further action. He seemed for the first time to be conscious of their presence.

"Leave go of my arm," he shouted. "What the devil do you mean by putting your dirty hands on me?"

"My lord," said the inspector, "you had better come quietly. I am here to arrest you for the murder of your uncle, Lord Ashiel, and I warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

"Are you going to arrest the whole family?" scoffed Mark. "Where's your warrant, man?"

"I have it here, my lord," replied the inspector, fumbling in his pocket for the paper the astonished General had signed when the inspector had imparted to him, in Lady Ruth's little sitting-room, the information he had received from Mr. Gimblet.

As Inspector Cameron fumbled, the young man, with a sudden jerk which found them unprepared, threw off the hold upon his arms and leaped aside.

As he did so, he plunged his hand into his pocket and drew forth a little phial.

"You shall never take me alive," he cried, and lifted it to his lips.

"Stop him!" shouted Gimblet.

Throwing his whole weight upon the uplifted arm, he forced the phial away from Mark's already open mouth; the other men rushed to his assistance, and between them the frustrated would-be suicide was overpowered, and held firmly while the inspector fastened a pair of handcuffs over his wrists. When it was done he raised his pinioned hands, as well as he could, and shook them furiously at Gimblet.

"It's you I have to thank for this," he shouted. "Curse you, you eavesdropping spy. But there are surprises in store for you, my friend. You've got me, it seems, and you say you've got the will. You'll find it more difficult to lay your hands on the heiress!"

The words and still more the triumphant tone in which they were uttered cast a chill upon them all.

"What do you mean?" cried Gimblet.

But not another syllable could be got out of the prisoner; and the inspector, besides, protested against questions being addressed to him.

With all the elation over his capture taken out of him, and with a mind full of brooding anxiety, Gimblet hurried on ahead of the returning party, and burst in upon Lady Ruth with eager inquiries.

But Juliet had not returned.

How was anyone to know that she had that morning made her way into the secret passage of the old tower, and watched through the slip of glass in the case of the clock what Julia Romaninov was doing in the library?

But leaving Gimblet and Lady Ruth to organize a search for her, we will return to Juliet in her hiding-place and see what was the end of her adventure.

CHAPTER XIX

When Juliet, incensed and indignant at the Russian's behaviour, discovered the door in the clock and was on the point of opening it and making her presence known, a noise of steps in the passage made her pause. As she listened, there was the sound of a key turning in the lock, the library door was thrown suddenly open, and Mark stepped into the room.

Juliet saw Julia's expression as she sprang round to face the newcomer. She saw it change, swift as lightning, from a look of horrified dismay to one of sudden transforming tenderness, as the girl recognized the intruder, that the hand already in the act of pushing open the door of the clock fell inert and limp to her side, and if she had been able to move she would have lost no time in retreating. She knew instinctively that she was seeing a secret laid bare which she had no right to spy upon. And yet, though her impulse was to fly from the place in embarrassment and confusion, something stronger than her natural discretion and delicacy held her where she stood. For Julia had not come here for the purpose of meeting Mark. She had come with a purpose less personal: something, Juliet felt convinced, that was in some way vaguely discreditable, and at the same time menacing. It could be for no harmless reason that she had taken this secret, dangerous way into the castle.

And so Juliet kept her ground, blushing at her role of spy, and averting her eyes as Julia dropped the book she was holding and ran forward to meet Mark, with that tell-tale look upon her face.

But Mark did not show the same pleasure. He stood, holding the handle of the door, which he had closed gently behind him, and looking with a certain sternness at the girl.

"Julia," he said, "you here! What are you doing?"

"Oh, Mark," she cried, not answering his question, "aren't you glad to see me? It is so long, oh, it is so long since I saw you!"

She threw her arms round his neck with a happy laugh, and drew his face down to hers.

"Darling! darling!" she murmured. "How can we live without each other for one single day!"

She spoke in a low, soft voice. To Juliet, to whom every purling syllable was painfully audible, it sounded cooingly, like the voice of doves.

To the surprise of the girl to whom Mark had proposed marriage two days before, when she ventured to peep through her spy window, Mark's arms were round Julia and he was kissing her ardently.

But after a moment he released himself gently.

"You haven't told me, dear," he said, "what you are doing here."

His voice held a note of authority before which Julia's assurance vanished.

"I--I wasn't doing anything," she muttered.

"Julia!" he remonstrated.

"Well," she said, with some show of defiance, "I suppose anyone may take a book from the library."

"Of course," he said, "you may take anything of mine you want. Still, as you are not staying in the house--In short, it seems to me that the more obvious course would have been to have said something to me about it; and besides," he added, struck by a sudden thought, "how in the world did you get in? The door was locked, and the key is on the outside."

"Oh, if you're going to make such a fuss about nothing," she exclaimed petulantly, her toe beginning to tap the boards, "it's not worth explaining anything to you." She turned away and walked towards the fireplace.

"I'm not making a fuss," Mark said quietly, "but you must tell me, Julia, what you are doing here, and how you came. To speak plainly, I don't believe you came for a book."

"If you don't believe me, what's the good of my saying anything?" she retorted. "Oh, how horrid you are to-day, Mark. I don't believe you love me a bit, any more." And leaning her head against the mantelpiece, she burst into tears.

"You know it isn't that, Julia," he said, looking at her fixedly. "Don't cry, there's a dear, good girl. You know that I love you. Why, you're the only thing in the whole world that I really want. But you must tell me how you came here. Tell me," he repeated, taking her hands from her face, and forcing her to look at him, "what you want in the library. Tell me, Julia, I want to know."

She seemed to struggle to keep silence, but to be unable to resist his questioning eyes.

"I suppose I must tell you," she murmured; "it's not that I don't want to. But they would kill me if they knew. Oh, Mark, I ought not to tell you, but how can I keep anything secret from my beloved? Swear to me that you will never repeat it, or try to hinder me in what I have to do?"

He bent and kissed her.

"Julia," he said, "can't you trust me?"

"I do, I do," she cried. "While you love me, I trust you. But if you left off, what then? That is the nightmare that haunts me. Mark, Mark, what would become of me if you were to change towards me?"

He kissed her again, murmuring reassuring words that did not reach Juliet's ears. "So tell me now," he ended, "what you were doing here."

"Mark," she said nervously, "you know where my childhood was passed?"

"In St. Petersburg," he replied wonderingly.

"Yes, in Petersburg. And you know how things are there. It is so different from your England, my England. For I am English really, Mark, although that thought always seems so strange to me; since during so many years I believed myself to be a Russian. I am the daughter of English parents; my father was a very respectable London plumber of the name of Harsden, whose business went to the bad and who died, leaving my mother to face ruin and starvation with a family of five small children, of whom I was the last. When a lady who took an interest in the parish in which we lived suggested that a friend of hers should adopt one of the children, my mother was only too thankful to accept the proposal, and I was the one from whom she chose to be parted. I have never seen her since, but she is still alive, and I send her money from time to time.

"The lady who adopted me was Countess Romaninov, and I believed myself her child till a day or two before she died, when she told me, to my lasting regret, the true story of my origin. But I was brought up a Russian, and I shall never feel myself to be English. Somehow the soil you live on in your childhood seems to get into your bones, as you say here. It is true that I speak your language easily, but it was Russian that my baby lips first learned. My sympathies, my point of view, my friends, all except yourself, are Russian. And I have one essentially Russian attribute, I am a member of what you would call a Nihilist society."

Mark interrupted her with an interjection of surprise, but she nodded her head defiantly, and continued:

"All my life, all my private ends and desires must be governed by the needs of my country. First and foremost I exist that the rule of the Tyrant may be abolished, and the Slav be free to work out his own salvation; he shall be saved from the fate that now overwhelms and crushes him; dragged bodily from under the heel of the oppressor. I am not the only one. We are many who think as one mind. And the day is not far distant when our sacrifices shall bear fruit. Ah, Mark, what a great cause, what a noble purpose, is this of ours! Perhaps I shall be able to convert you, to fire your cold British blood with my enthusiasm?"

She stopped and looked at him inquiringly. But he made no reply, and after a moment she continued, placing her hand fondly upon his shoulder as she spoke.

"Our plan is to terrify the rulers into submission. We must not shrink from killing, and killing suddenly and unexpectedly, till they abandon the wickedness of their Ways. They must never know what it is to feel safe. And we see to it that they do not. Death waits for them at the street corner, on their travels, at their own doorsteps. They never know at what moment the bomb may not be thrown, or the pistol fired. It is sad that explosives are so unreliable. There are many difficulties. You would not believe the obstacles that we find placed in our path at every turning. And for those who are suspected there is Siberia, and the mines. But it is worth it. It is worth anything to feel that one is working and risking all for one's country, and one's fellow-countrymen. It is an honour to belong to a band of such noble men and women. But now and then one is admitted who turns out to be unworthy. Yes, even such a cause as ours has traitors to contend with. And your uncle, Lord Ashiel, was one of them."

"What," said Mark incredulously, "Uncle Douglas a Nihilist? Nonsense. It's impossible."

"He was, really. For he joined the 'Friends of Man' when he was at the British Embassy at Petersburg long years ago; and no sooner had he been initiated than he turned round and denounced the society and all its works. Worse still, he declared his intention of hindering it from carrying out its programme. He would have been got rid of there and then, but as ill-luck would have it he had, by an unheard-of chain of accidents, become possessed of an important document belonging to the society. It was, indeed, a list of the principal people on the executive committee that fell into his hands, and he took the precaution of sending it to England, with instructions that if anything happened to him it should be forwarded to the Russian Police, before he made known his ridiculous objections to our programme. Here, as you will understand, was a most impossible situation with which there was apparently no means of coping.

"For years that one man hampered and frustrated our entire organization.

He was practically able to dictate his own terms, for he announced his intention of publishing the list of names if we carried out any important project, and no device could be contrived to stop his being as good as his word. The tyrant has walked unscathed except by mere private enterprise, and the government we could have caused to crumble to the ground has flourished and continued to work evil as before. We have been crippled, paralysed in every direction. It was only last year that there seemed reason to think that Lord Ashiel had removed the document from the Bank of England where it had for so long been guarded, and there appeared to be a possibility that he now kept it in his own house. If that were so, there seemed a good chance of getting hold of it, and how proud I am, Mark, to think that it was I who was chosen to make the attempt!

"I came to England with the best introductions into society, and had no difficulty in making friends with your aunt and obtaining an invitation to stay here. Last year I did not succeed in gaining any information. Your uncle, for some reason, seemed rather to avoid me, and I did not make any headway towards gaining his confidence. I never could be sure if he suspected me. This year there was a question of replacing me by some one else, but it was judged that Lord Ashiel's suspicions would be certainly awakened by the appearance of another Russian, so, in the hope that I was not associated in his mind with the people to which he had behaved so basely, I was ordered to try again.

"A member of the society, who occupies a high and responsible position on the council, accompanied me to the neighbourhood, and from time to time I report to him and receive his advice and instructions. He stays in Crianan, so that I have some one within reach to go to for advice. At least, so I am officially informed, but I know very well he is really there to keep watch on me, for it is not the habit of the society to trust its members more than is unavoidable. If it is possible, I go once a week to Crianan and make my report, but I can't always manage to go, and then he rows across the loch after dark and I go out and meet him. He was to come on the night of the murder, and my first thought when I heard of it was that he might be caught in the shrubberies and mistaken for the murderer. But it appears that he had already taken alarm, and I am thankful to say he was able to escape in good time."

"So David really did see some one wandering about that night," Mark commented thoughtfully. "Ah, Julia, if you'd told me all this earlier everything might have been different. Poor old David need never have been dragged into it at all."

She looked at him a moment, as if puzzled, and then continued her story.

"It was thought that I might be able to bring about your uncle's death by some means that should have all the appearance of an accident, and so perhaps not involve action on the part of those who hold the document--that is, if it should prove not to be in his own keeping--for he had always assured the council that no decisive step would be taken except as a retort to signs of violence on our part, whether directed towards himself or others.

"I have not been able to find any trace of the list. I thought I had it one day in London, when I followed Lord Ashiel to a detective's office, and managed to gain possession of an envelope given him by Lord Ashiel, but as far as I could make out it contained nothing of any importance. It was a bitter disappointment. You can imagine the consternation into which we were thrown by the murder. It seemed certain that his death would be attributed to our organization, and if anyone held the list for him it would be published immediately. Four days have passed, however, and my superior has received a cable saying that so far all is well. It looks more and more as if the list had been kept here, but I have hunted everywhere and found nothing. Oh, I have searched without ceasing since the moment I heard of his death! I came here even on the very night of the murder, and moved the body with my own hands in order to get at the bureau drawers. There is a secret way into the room through that old clock there, which leads into the grounds; I found it long ago, one day when I was exploring outside in the shrubberies. I have often been here, and searched, and searched again. Do you know anything of this document, Mark? If you do, I beg and implore you to give it to me. Otherwise I cannot answer for your life; and, as for our marriage, that is out of the question unless I am successful in my undertaking."

It may be imagined with what amazement and growing horror Juliet listened to this avowal. That Julia, the girl with whom she had associated on terms of easy familiarity which had been near to becoming something like intimacy in the close contact and companionship of a country-house life, that this girl, an honoured guest in Lord Ashiel's house, should have gained her footing there for her own treacherous ends, or at the bidding of a band of political assassins! Juliet could scarcely believe her ears as she heard the calm, indifferent tone in which Julia spoke of the drawbacks to "getting rid" of Lord Ashiel, and of the contemplated "accident" which was to have befallen him. She would have fled from where she stood, if mingled fear and curiosity to hear more had not rooted her to the spot. Her alarm was tempered by the presence of Mark. If this girl should discover her hiding there and show signs of the violence that might be expected from such a character, Mark would be there to protect her. She could trust him to know how to deal with the Russian, whose true nature must now be apparent to him.

But Mark, to her astonishment, had not drawn away from Julia with the repugnance and disgust that were to be expected. Instead, he was looking at her, strangely, indeed, but almost eagerly.

"It was you, then, who moved the body! To think that I never guessed!" he murmured, half to himself. "If I had known, I might have spared myself the trouble to--" Then more loudly he reproached his companion.

"And you have never said a word to me! Oh, Julia, you didn't trust me." He shook his head at her mournfully.

"Trust you!" she retorted. "Did you trust me? But I would have trusted you," she added, gazing fondly into his eyes, "if I had dared risk the punishment that will surely be meted out to me if it is known I have done so. You don't know how rigid the rules of our society are. But you

haven't told me yet if you have the list."

"Not I," he said. "I never heard of its existence. I suppose that anonymous letter that came addressed to Uncle Douglas after his death had something to do with that."

"Did a letter come from Paris? They sent them to him from time to time. It prevented his suspecting me. But you will give me the list if you find it, won't you? It means everything to me."

"Of course I will," he promised. "It is no earthly good to me, so far as I know. But you, when you were looking for it, did you, among all the papers you examined, ever come across such a thing as a will?"

"No, never," she replied. "Mrs. Clutsam told me it could not be found. You may be sure, if I had discovered one which did not leave you everything, I should have destroyed it."

"Dear little Julia!" Mark drew her to him and kissed her. "How sweet you are. There is no one like you!"

"Really? Do you really love me, Mark?"

"Darling, of course I do."

"Will you always? Are you quite, quite sure that I am the one girl in all the world for you, as you are the one man for me?"

"Darling, you are the only one in the world I have ever so much as looked at."

"Would you never, never forget me, or marry anyone else, no matter what happened?"

"Never," he assured her, "never."

She sighed contentedly.

"What should I do if you forgot me, Mark? I should die. But," she added in a different tone, "I think I should kill you first!"

Mark laughed a little uneasily.

"Hush, hush," he said, "you mustn't talk so much about killing. A minute ago you were talking of killing my poor old uncle. If I took you seriously what should I think? It is lucky I love you as I do, otherwise doesn't it occur to you that it might get you into trouble to talk in this wild way?"

"You can take me as seriously as you like," she answered gravely. "I am serious enough, God knows. But I shouldn't talk about it, even to you, if I didn't know it was safe. You see, I know you are like me."

"Like you? I'm dashed if I am! How do you mean? I am like you?"

She looked at him squarely, and nodded.

"Yes," she said, "you are like me. You would not hesitate to kill if you thought it necessary. You think just the same as me on that subject. Only you have gone farther than I have--yet."

"Julia," he cried, "what do you mean?"

"I mean that I know all about you, Mark," she replied gravely. "I know what you think you have kept secret from me. I know it was you who killed your uncle."

With a muffled cry Mark shook himself free, and sprang away from her.

"What are you saying?" he whispered hoarsely. "You are mad, girl! But I won't have such lies uttered, I won't have it, I tell you."

With terrified amazement Juliet saw his face change, become ugly, distorted. But Julia showed no sign of alarm.

"Why get so excited?" she asked calmly. "What does it matter? Do you imagine I would betray you? I, who would sell my soul for you! I know you did it. It is no use keeping up this pretence of innocence to me, who had more right to kill him than you. Why shouldn't you kill who you wish? But don't say you didn't do it. It is foolish. I saw you."

"It is a lie. You can't have seen me," Mark declared again, but with less assurance. "You were in the drawing-room all the time. Lady Ruth and Maisie Tarver both said so. The drawing-room doesn't even look out on the garden. There is no room that does, except the library, and you weren't there then, anyhow."

"I didn't see you fire the shot," said Julia, "but I saw you afterwards when you went to put back your rifle in the gun-room. I told you that after the first search in the grounds was over, and everyone had gone up to bed, I slipped out of the house by the door near the gunroom, and came round to the library to see if Lord Ashiel had carried the list on him. When I came back, I let myself in quietly by the door which I had left unbolted, and had just got half-way up the back stairs when I heard footsteps in the passage below, and crouched down behind the banisters. I saw you come along the passage, carrying an electric lantern in one hand and your rifle in the other. I saw you look round anxiously before opening the gun-room door and going in. When you had vanished, I hurried on up to my room, for it was not the time or place to tell you what I had seen, but I left a crack of my door open, and after rather a long while saw you pass along the passage to your own room; this time without your gun. I knew, of course, that you had been cleaning it and putting it away."

She spoke with the indifference with which one may refer to a regrettable but incontrovertible fact, and Mark seemed to feel it useless to deny

what she said.

"You had no right to spy on me," he exclaimed angrily when she had done.

"Oh, Mark," she cried, dismayed, "I wasn't spying. It was the merest accident. And I think it's horrid of you to mind my knowing. Why didn't you tell me all about it before. I might have helped you, I'm sure."

But he would have none of her endearments, and threw off the hand she laid upon his arm with a rough gesture.

"Mark, oh, Mark," she wailed, "don't be angry with me! You know I can't bear it. I can bear anything but that. Don't, don't be angry with me."

She had but one thought; it was for him, and he who ran might read it shining in the depths of her great eyes. After a few minutes of sulking, Mark relented.

"No one could be angry with you for long, Julia," he declared.

Instantly she was once more all smiles.

"Don't ever be angry with me again," she urged, her hands in his. "And now that you have forgiven me, tell me all about it. What made you do such a dreadful thing, Mark? You must have had some good reason, I know. I never would doubt that."

"There's nothing much to tell," he said unwillingly. "I had a good reason, yes. I must have money. It is for your sake, darling, that I must get it. I can't marry you without it. I hadn't meant to kill him, if I could get it without. He was ill, and had left his fortune to me. I thought I should get it in time, by letting Nature take her course. It was that or ruin, and I really had to do it for your sake, darling. I didn't want to hurt the old boy. Why should I? It's not a pleasant thing to have to do. But I had no choice--there was no other way of getting enough money, and I simply had to get it. It was his life or mine. You don't understand. I can't explain. It just had to be done, and there's an end of it. Everything was going wrong. That girl, that Byrne girl, I imagined he was going to marry her. You know we all did. That would have spoilt everything. At first I thought she could be got out of the way, but she seemed to bear a charmed life."

"What?" cried Julia, "did you try to kill her too?"

"Why, if anyone had to be got rid of," he admitted defiantly, "it seemed better to go for a stranger, like her, than for my own uncle. Come, you must see that, surely! She was nothing to me, and, anyhow, my hand was forced. It's very hard that I should have been put in such a position. I'm the last person to do harm to a fly, but one must think of oneself."

Since it was no use denying the murder, he seemed to find some sort of satisfaction in telling Julia of his other crimes. And yet, though he tried hard to speak with an affectation of indifference, it was plain

that he kept a watchful eye upon his listener, and was ready to fasten resentfully upon the first sign of horror, or even disapproval. For all his efforts, the tone of his disclosures was at once swaggering and suspicious; but he need have had no anxiety as to the spirit in which they would be received. It was clear that Julia brought to his judgment no remembrance of ordinary human standards of conduct. To her he was above such criticisms, as the Immortals might be supposed to be above the rules that applied to dwellers upon earth. What he did was right in her eyes, because he did it, and she admired his brutality, as she adored the rest of him, whole-heartedly, without reservation.

"I had a shot at her," he went on, "one day on the moor when she was with David; but I missed her. It was a rotten shot. I can't think how I came to do it. Then when she fell into the river--I saw her standing by it as I came home from stalking.... I had walked on ahead, and where the path runs along above the waterfall pool I happened to go to the edge and look over. There she was on a stone right at the edge, by the deepest part. It looked as if she'd been put there on purpose, and I should have been a fool to miss such a chance. It's no good going against fate. As a matter of fact I thought I'd got her sitting this time. I caught up the nearest piece of rock and dropped it down on her. That was a good shot, though I say it, but it hit her on the shoulder instead of the head as luck would have it, which was bad luck for me. However, in she went, and I thought all was well and lost no time in getting away from the place. If it hadn't been for that meddling fool Andy!... Well, then, at dinner, Uncle Douglas came out with the news that she was his daughter, not his intended, and everything looked worse than ever. Afterwards when she went to talk to him in the library, and passed through the billiard-room where I was knocking the balls about and feeling pretty savage, I can tell you, I happened, by a fluke, to ask her if she knew where David was. She said he'd gone into the garden.

"Then I saw my chance, and it seemed too good to miss. Why should I let my inheritance be stolen from me? I ran off to the gun-room for a gun. I meant to take David's rifle, but I found he hadn't cleaned it, so I left it alone and took mine, as the thing was really too important to risk using a strange gun unless it was absolutely necessary, and his is a little shorter in the stock than I like. I nipped back and let myself out of the passage door into the enclosed garden. It was a black night, though I knew my way blindfolded about there. But the curtains of the library were drawn, and I couldn't see between them without stepping on the flower bed. I knew too much to leave my footmarks all over them, but I had to get on to the bed to have a chance of getting a shot. So I got the long plank the gardeners use to avoid stepping on the flower beds when they're bedding out, from the tool-house behind the holly hedge where I knew it was kept, and put it down near the hedge. It is held up clear of the ground by two cross pieces of wood, one at each end, you know, so there would be no marks left to identify me by.

"When I walked to the end of the plank, I could see straight into the middle of the room; but they must have been sitting near the fire, for no one was in sight. I could see the writing bureau and the chair in front of it, and dimly in the back of the room I could make out the face of the

clock, but that was all.

"Well, I stood there for what seemed a long while. You've no idea how cramping it is to stand on a narrow plank with no room to take a step forward or back, for long at a time. And I don't mind telling you I got a bit jumpy, waiting there. If anyone chanced to come along, what could I say by way of explanation? I couldn't think of anything the least likely to wash. And somehow, in the dark, one begins to imagine things. I saw David coming at me across the lawn every other minute. And it seemed so hideously likely that he should come. I knew he was somewhere out in the grounds. By Jove, if he had, he'd have got the bullet instead of Uncle Douglas! But he didn't come. Those beastly shadows and shapes and whisperings and rustlings that seemed to be all round me, hiding in the night, turned out to be nothing after all. But when I didn't fancy him at my elbow, I imagined he was in the gunroom, wondering where the dickens my rifle had got to.

"Oh, I had a happy half-hour among the roses, I tell you! A rifle is a heavy thing too. I leant it up against a rose-bush and tried to sit down on the plank, but it wouldn't do, and I saw I must bear it standing, or Uncle Douglas might cross in front of the slit between the curtains without my having time to get a shot. You must remember I'd been on the hill all day, so that I was very stiff to begin with. It got so bad that I began to think it was hardly worth the candle at last--and it's a wonder I didn't miss him clean--when, just as I was on the point of giving the whole thing up and going in again, he came suddenly into my field of vision, and actually sat down at the table.

"I took a careful aim and fired. I saw him fall forward, and then I jumped off the plank and hurled it back under the hedge before I ran for the house. I had left the door ajar, and I just stayed to close it, and then darted into the empty billiard-room and thrust my rifle under a sofa. It was a quick bit of work. I had counted on Juliet Byrne waiting a moment or two to see if she could do anything to help him before she roused the house, or it roused itself, and she was rather longer than I expected. I don't mind owning I got into a panic when minutes passed and no one appeared, and I began to think I must have missed the old boy altogether. I was within an ace of going to make certain, when the door opened and in she came. Oh well, you know all the rest. That silly old ass, David, was still mooning about in the garden, thinking of her, I suppose, which was very lucky for me."

Julia had listened with absorbed interest.

"I think it is wonderful," she said, "that you should have gone through all that for my sake. I shall always try to deserve it, my dear. Was it all, all for me, that you did it, truly?"

"Yes," Mark assured her, gruffly monosyllabic.

"But how was it," she asked caressingly, "that Sir David's footprints were found all over the rose-bed. What was he doing there?"

"That was an afterthought," Mark admitted. "It was a tophole idea. After every one had gone upstairs, I crept down and got my Mannlicher from where I had hidden it, and took it to the gun-room, where I cleaned it and put it in its usual place. It was lucky for me that David had left his weapon dirty. It was jolly unlike him to do it. I was thinking what a good thing it was, and how well things looked like turning out--for I thought I could manage the girl if she was able to prove that she really was a McConachan--and it struck me I ought to be able to contrive that the business should look a bit blacker against poor old David. Every one knew he'd had a row with Uncle Douglas about his beastly dog, and if I could only manufacture a little more evidence against him I knew I should be pretty safe, one way and another. I was going back to the garden to put by the gardener's plank, when I thought of using his boots. It didn't take long to find them among all the boots used that day by the household, which were ranged in a row in the place where they clean them in the back premises. His bootmakers' name was in them. I took them, and when I got to the garden door I put them on, and went out and trampled about among the roses till I was pretty sure that even the blindest country bobby couldn't fail to notice the tracks I'd left, though of course I couldn't see them myself in the dark. Then I got the plank out of the hedge and put it away where I'd found it. After that, I took the boots back, and went to bed; and very glad I was to get there. Now you've heard the whole story."

"How clever you are," murmured the girl. "There's no one like you," she said, "no one." Mark smiled rather fatuously. He evidently shared her opinion that his brains were something slightly out of the way. "And everything happened just as you'd planned," she went on admiringly. "They suspected Sir David from the first. I should have, myself, if I hadn't known it was you who had done it."

"Yes," said Mark, "they suspected him, the silly idiots! They might have known he hasn't the initiative to do a thing like that. And the girl can't prove her relationship to Uncle Douglas, just as I expected. I thought there might be some difficulty about that. But I wish I could find the will he made in her favour. I should feel safer then, for she told me he said he'd worded it so that she should get the money whether she was proved his daughter or not. And who knows what other mad clauses he may have put in it. Lately, for some reason I could never make out, I felt sure he had changed towards me. He let fall a hint one day that his legacies to me were conditional on my good behaviour. I don't feel easy about it at all. Some one must have been telling him things--poisoning his mind. But I've hunted high and low, and found nothing. I'm sick of looking over musty old bills."

"Oh, we shall find it between us now," said Julia hopefully. "I wish I had some idea where the list I want is, though," she added.

"There's that detective, too," pursued Mark. "That fellow Gimblet. I'm rather fed up with him. Not that he seems any use at his work, though he's supposed to be rather first-class at it, I believe."

"Gimblet! Is that who it is? Mrs. Clutsam told me a London detective

was here, but I didn't know who it was. I have met him before, and found him very easy to manage. I don't think you need be afraid of anything he may do."

"I shall be glad when he's off the place, anyhow," said Mark.

"I shall be glad when the whole business is over and forgotten," Julia rejoined. "I wish we could be married at once, Mark darling. But why can't it be given out that we are engaged. I don't understand why we should keep it a secret now. I can't stand seeing so little of you as I have these last few days."

"Be patient, darling, wait just a little longer. There are reasons, as I have told you. I must get my financial affairs straight, for one thing, before I allow you to tie yourself to me. Suppose I turn out to be a beggar? I couldn't let you marry me then, you know."

"Mark!" Julia's voice was full of reproach. "You know perfectly well how little I care about your money. I would be only too glad to marry you if you hadn't a penny. But perhaps you mean that if you were poor you wouldn't want to burden yourself with a wife?"

"You know how I adore you, Julia. How can you suggest such a thing? I couldn't even dream of a life without you. You show how little you know me. But, believe me, it is wisest to wait a short time longer before we are publicly engaged. You must take my word for it, and not made me unhappy by imagining such cruel things. Come, let us look for this list of yours. What were you doing--searching among the books?"

"Yes," said she, rising, as he went towards a bookshelf, and following him. "I thought it might be hidden between the leaves of one of these old volumes. One reads of such things."

"I wonder," he said absently. "The will, too, may be here. Is there a Bible anywhere? I believe that's a favourite place of concealment. Then, when the heir is virtuous and reads his Bible, he gets the legacy, you know; while, if he isn't, he doesn't. A sort of poetic justice is meted out. If I find it in that way I shall take it as a sign that I am really the virtuous one and that Heaven absolves me from all blame."

He spoke mockingly, but Julia answered very seriously:

"Of course you ought to have it; and if I don't blame you, why should anyone else?"

"Well," he said after a pause, "at all events I mean to get it, whether or no, if I have to pull down every stone of the place. That reminds me," he added, "where is the secret entrance you use? Through this old clock? Who would have thought it?"

In a moment Juliet realized that she was going to be caught. She had been so absorbed in listening to the dreadful revelations that had been made during the last half-hour that not till now had she considered how

dangerous was her position.

As he spoke, Mark threw open the door of the clock case. Too late, she turned to fly; he caught her by the arm and, with a stifled oath, dragged her into the room.

"How long have you been there?" he cried, and fell to swearing horribly; while Julia stood by, not speaking, but looking at Juliet with an expression which frightened her more than all his violence.

CHAPTER XX

It did not occur to Juliet to deny that she had overheard their talk. She had been found in the act of spying on them, and it was inconceivable that they should believe she had not done so. Besides, she was raging at the thought of what she had heard, and her anger gave her a courage she might otherwise have found it hard to maintain.

"I have been there all the time," she declared stoutly. "I heard all you said, you wicked, wicked man. A murderer! Oh, how horrible it all is!"

Julia laid a hand on Mark's arm.

"She will tell what she knows," she said, trembling.

"She shall not," Mark stammered furiously. He seemed to be half suffocating with rage. "She shall not go unless she swears to say nothing. Swear it, I say!"

He seized Juliet by the shoulder and shook her violently to emphasize his words.

"I won't swear anything of the kind," she retorted, trying to break from his grasp. "Do you suppose you can kill me, too, without being found out? There is a detective here now, and Sir David Southern is not at hand to lay the blame on. You coward! How dare you touch me!"

The truth of her words seemed to strike home to Mark, for he left go of her suddenly, and stood, biting his nails and scowling, the picture of irresolution and malignance.

Juliet lost no time in following up any advantage she might have gained.

"I can't help knowing that you care for him," she said, addressing herself to Julia, "though I wouldn't have listened to that part if I could have helped it. But how can you? How can you? I can't understand how you can feel as you do about killing people, but at least if you did such a thing you would imagine it was for the good of your country, while this man thinks of nothing but his own selfish ends. Money, that is all

he wants! How can you condone such a crime as his? To kill Lord Ashiel, that good, kind man who had treated him like a son all his life, who did everything for him. And just for the sake of money! It's not even as if he wanted it really. He's not starving. He had everything, in reason, that he wanted. If he needed more, urgently, I believe he had only to tell his uncle, and it would have been given to him. Oh, it is beyond all words! He must be a fiend."

Indignation choked her. She spoke in bursts of trembling anger, her words sounding tamely in her own ears. All she could say seemed commonplace and inadequate beside the knowledge that this man was her father's murderer.

Even Julia, indifferent to every aspect of the case that did not touch upon her relations with her lover, was shaken by the scornful disgust with which the broken sentences were poured forth; and, if her infatuation for Mark was too complete to allow her to consider any action of his unjustifiable, still she realized, perhaps for the first time, the feelings with which other people would view the thing that he had done.

"You don't understand him," she faltered. "He didn't want money for himself alone. It was for me he did it. He was too proud to ask me to marry a poor man. You could never understand his love for me. How can I blame him? How many men would run such risks for the girl they loved? I am proud, yes proud, to be loved like that!"

"You believe his lies," Juliet cried contemptuously. "You believe he loves you so much? Why it is not two days since he came to me and asked me to marry him."

"What!" Julia spoke in a panting whisper. Her face had suddenly lost every particle of colour. "Say it's not true," she begged, turning miserably to the man.

He made an effort to deny the charge.

"Of course. Not a word of truth in it. Damned nonsense," he blustered.

But his eyes fell before Juliet's scornful gaze, and Julia was not deceived.

"It can't be true, oh, it can't," she moaned. "No man could be so vile."

"No other man could," Juliet amended. In spite of herself she was sorry for the girl, whose stricken face showed plainly the anguish she was undergoing. "Forget him, Julia; he is not worthy to tie your shoe-lace. He came to me after they had taken David away, and asked me first if I would take his inheritance even though I couldn't prove my birth, which he must have known perfectly that I should never dream of doing, and then proposed I should marry him, saying that he was very fond of me, and that in that way justice would be done as regards Lord Ashiel's money, however things turned out for me. I thought it honourable and generous at the time, and so did Lady Ruth when I told her--oh yes, she knows about

it and can tell you it is true--but now I see that all he wanted was to be on the safe side, and, if I had accepted him and had turned out to have no claim upon his uncle's fortune, he would have broken the engagement on some easy pretext. Can you deny it?" she demanded of Mark.

But he could not face her, though he made an effort again to brazen it out.

Every word she had spoken seemed to strike Julia like a blow. She shrank quivering away, and threw herself down on to a chair, her face hidden in her hands. Juliet went to her and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Don't think of him any more," she said. "Presently you will hate yourself for having cared for a murderer. Just now, I know, your love for him makes you gloss over his crimes, but when you are yourself you will see how odious they are. Poor Julia, I hate to hurt you so, but it is better, isn't it, that you should know? You will forget this madness. He is not worth your wasting another thought on. Think how shamefully he has deceived you. Think of all his lying words, of how he told you he had never looked at another woman."

Julia raised her head and showed a face, white as chalk, in which the great brown eyes seemed to burn like fires of hatred.

"Yes," she said in a hard, even voice. "I am thinking of it. I shall not forget him. No. Instead, I shall think of him day and night, be sure of that. I shall laugh as I think of him; laugh at the thought of him in his place in the dock, or in his prison cell. I shall laugh when I give my evidence against him, and most of all I shall laugh on the day when he is hanged. If his grave is to be found, I shall dance upon it. Oh, it will be a merry day for me, that day when the cord is tightened round his false neck!"

She went near to Mark, and hissed the last words into his face, leaning forward, with one hand on her own throat. But he seemed to shrink less before her vindictive passion than he had under the colder scorn of Juliet's denunciations.

"Come, Juliet," said Julia, calming herself a little, although hate was still blazing in her eyes, "let us leave this place. We must send for the police."

"Julia," said Mark, stepping forward, and speaking with some of his former assurance, "you condemn me unheard. Why should you believe this girl before me? It is not like you, Julia. It is not like the girl I love. For I do love you, darling, in spite of what you may think; and, till a few moments ago, I thought you loved me too. But I see now what your love is. One whiff of suspicion, one word of accusation, and without proof or evidence you condemn me, and your so-called affection disappears. Julia, I think you have broken my heart."

Juliet gave vent to a derisive sound which can only be called a snort; but it was plain that his words, and more especially the manner of sad

yet tender reproach in which they were uttered, were not without their effect on the other girl. Her eyes wavered uneasily; she twisted and tore at her handkerchief.

"I have heard what you have to say," she murmured. "I saw that you could not deny what Juliet told me."

"I did deny it. But what is the use of talking to you when you are in such a state? You are determined beforehand to disbelieve me. And I have no wish to justify myself to Miss Byrne, though I am willing to swallow my pride and do so to you."

"Well," she said after a moment's hesitation, "justify yourself if you can. No one shall say I would not listen. God knows I shall be glad enough if you can clear yourself."

"To begin with," said Mark, "I admit that, superficially, there is truth in what you have heard. But only superficially, for the person I deceived was not yourself but this young lady. I certainly, as she suggests, never had the slightest intention of marrying her. For one thing I was absolutely certain she would refuse me, but it seemed a good precautionary move to make what might appear a generous proposal, and at the same time get a sort of mandate from the possible heiress herself to stick to my uncle's fortune. You may be sure I should never have given it up, in any case, but it is as well to keep up appearances. The business was only a move in the game I am playing, and no more affects the sincerity of my love for you than any of the social equivocations we all find necessary from time to time. I love you, Julia, and you alone. How can you doubt it? I love you so much that I am willing to overlook your want of confidence in me, and to forgive the cruel things you said just now. Darling, how can I tell you, before a third person, what I feel for you? You are everything to me; and, if you no longer love me, I don't care what happens. Give me up to the police if you like. The gallows is as good a place as another, without your love."

Long before he had finished, all traces of resentment had vanished. When he ceased speaking, she gave in completely, and threw herself upon his breast, sobbing passionately, and begging his forgiveness for having doubted him for an instant, while he soothed and comforted her in a low tone. Juliet did not know what to do or which way to look. The two stood between her and the door, and she felt an absurd awkwardness about trying to pass them. Was it likely she would be allowed to go out free to denounce them? She was afraid of trying.

At last Julia was calm again, and there came a silence, during which the pair glanced at Juliet and then at each other.

"What's to be done?" Julia asked at length, and then suddenly, without waiting for an answer, "I have an idea, Mark, that will save you. If her mouth can be stopped for a time, will you be able to get clear away?"

"I shall have to try, I suppose," he replied, with a trace of his former sulkiness. "To think that everything should miscarry because of a slip

of a girl!"

"You had better go to Glasgow and get on board some ship there which will take you to a place of safety. I shall have to stay behind till the matter of the list is settled one way or the other. But then, when I have reported to my superiors, I can join you, and we can begin life together in some far-off country. I shall be as happy in one place as in another with you, Mark; are you sure you will be, too, with only me?"

Mark hastened to reassure her on that point, but his tone as he said it did not carry conviction to Juliet. Julia, however, seemed satisfied.

"Miss Byrne can choose," she continued. "Either she swears not to say a word till we are both safe away, or else we can shut her in the dungeon of the castle. I know where it is, in the wall of this tower. She will never be found there, and I can take her food from time to time till I am ready to join you. Isn't that a good plan?"

Mark considered.

"I don't think we will give her the option of swearing not to tell," he said presently.

"As if I would ever promise such a thing!" Juliet interrupted, indignant.

"But," he went on, ignoring this outburst, "otherwise I think your idea is good. Where is this dungeon? We may be disturbed at any minute, and enough time has been wasted already."

"I will go first and show the way," said Julia. "I have an electric torch," and she stepped into the clock and lowered herself through the trap-door.

Mark motioned to Juliet to follow.

"Ladies first," he said with a sneer.

Juliet turned and made a dash for the door.

"I won't go! I won't! I won't!" she cried desperately, though in her heart she knew she could not resist if he chose to use force. Perhaps if she screamed, some one would hear. Oh, where was Gimblet? Why did he leave her to the mercy of these people? "Help! Help!" She lifted up her voice and shrieked as loud as she could.

With a vicious scowl Mark sprang upon her, and clapped a hand over her mouth. Then, as she still continued to produce muffled sounds of distress, he stuffed his handkerchief in between her teeth and, lifting her bodily in his arms, thrust her before him into the clock, and pushed her roughly down the hidden stair. Half-way down she lost her footing, and fell to the bottom, where Julia was standing with her little lamp in her hand.

Mark was following close behind, and between them they picked her up and hurried her, limping and bruised, along the narrow passage. She was allowed to take the handkerchief out of her mouth, for no cry could penetrate the immense thickness of these blocks of stone. At the point where there was a break to right and left in the walls of the passage, Julia came to a standstill.

"Here it is," she said, turning her light on to the opening in the wall on the left-hand side. "The door is gone, so you will have to fetch something to block it up with."

It seemed to be a small, cell-like chamber, built into the side of the tower. It may have contained a dozen cubic yards of space, and had neither door nor window.

"There are some slabs of stone at the end of the passage," said Julia. "They are heavy, but you are strong, you will be able to bring them. We must leave a little space at the top of the door to admit some air, and for me to pass food through to our prisoner." She laughed with a feverish merriment. "It will be like feeding the animals at the Zoo," she said.

Mark signified his approval by a nod.

"And is this the way?" he asked, turning round and starting off in the opposite direction.

"No, no!" Julie cried, laying a detaining hand upon his arm. "I don't know what there is down there. I think it is a well. See, you are on the very edge."

She cast the light on to a round dark opening in the ground some six feet in front of and below them. From where they stood the floor began to slant suddenly and steeply downward, so that if Mark had taken another step, it looked as if nothing could have prevented his sliding down into the gaping circle of blackness at the bottom.

Julia shuddered violently.

"Oh," she cried, "if you had gone over! Come away, do come away!"

"It's a funny sort of well," he said, "Looks to me like something else. Did you ever hear of oubliettes, Julia?"

Juliet, as she heard him, grew white with terror.

"Julia, Julia," she cried, "you won't let him throw me down there?"

"No, no," said Julia. "He would not. There is no reason.... Mark," she urged, "come away from here."

But he only laughed shortly.

"Don't be so hysterical," he said, and continued to bend his gaze upon

the hole at the bottom of the slope. It seemed to have a sort of fascination for him. Finally he picked a piece of loose mortar from the wall and threw it down into the gap. A second later there was a dull sound which might have been a splash. "Perhaps it is a well after all. Did you think it sounded as if it had fallen into water?"

"Yes," said Julia, "I am sure it did. Do come away. I hate being here."

And indeed she was shivering from head to foot, and not Juliet herself seemed more anxious to leave the place.

"Just one more shot," said Mark. "Here, Julia, stoop down, and roll that bit of stone slowly down the slope, while I hold on to our prisoner. We shall hear better that way. Give me your lamp."

Anxious to satisfy him, Julia picked up the fragment he had knocked from the rough wall, and stooping down stretched out her hand to set the stone in motion. But, as she did so, Mark loosened his grip on Juliet, and bending quickly behind this poor girl who loved him seized her by the shoulders and threw her forward on to her face. The steep pitch of the floor finished what the impetus given by his onslaught had begun. Julia shot head first down the slope, and disappeared into the black chasm of the well.

One long agonized scream came up to them out of the darkness, and rolled its echoes through the lonely passages.

Then the distant sound of a splash; and silence.

Back against the wall, Juliet cowered, her whole body shaken by great sobs. She was petrified with terror of this fiendish man, but her fears for herself gave way before the horror of what she had seen.

"Oh, what have you done, what have you done?" she wept.

Mark tried to summon up a jeering smile. The lantern threw no light upon his white and twitching face.

"You don't suppose I meant to let her go free, after the taste she gave me of her temper?" he asked, in a voice he could not keep from shaking a little. "Do you suppose I like having to do these things? You women have never the slightest sense of common justice. The whole thing is perfectly beastly to me. But how could I live with a girl who would be ready to threaten me with the gallows every time she got out of bed wrong foot first? It's not fair to blame me for other people's faults."

He spoke querulously, with the air of a much-injured man. Though Juliet was beyond any coherent reply, he seemed afraid of meeting her eyes, and looked resolutely away from her, his glance shifting and wavering from the walls to the floor, from the floor to the stones of the low roof; up, down, and sideways, but never resting on her. At last, as if drawn there irresistibly and against his will, they fell once more on the dark circle of the mouth of the pit, and he started back, shuddering violently.

"As if I hadn't enough to bear without being saddled with hideous memories for the rest of my life!" he cried with bitter irritability. "If you had an ounce of common fairness in your composition you would admit I could do no less. Why, any day she might have got jealous, or something, and flown into a passion again, and denounced me to the police. Besides, I have no wish to be obliged to fly the country. Why should I? She was the only person who knew the truth; except you. That is why you must follow her."

"No, no!" cried Juliet despairingly, but without avail, for her feeble strength could offer him no effective opposition, and he thrust her easily on to the slope. She felt instinctively that at that angle the merest push would make her lose her balance, and sank quickly to her knees, catching him round the ankle with one hand, and clinging desperately.

He swore furiously, and bent down to unclasp her fingers from his leg. Then he flung her hand away from him; and cut off from all assistance she began instantly to slide backwards, slowly but irresistibly.

CHAPTER XXI

Juliet dug her nails into the cracks of the stone floor with all the energy of despair, but in a moment her feet were over the edge of the pit and she was falling. Her fingers gripped the edge with a fierce tenacity, and for some minutes she hung there, minutes that seemed longer than all the rest of her life put together.

And so she hung, her knees drawn up in a frantic effort to pull herself out of the depths, till her muscles refused any longer to contract, and she felt herself gradually straightening out and growing, it seemed, heavier and heavier, till she knew that in one more second her fingers would slip from their hold, and all would be over.

But as she dropped into a straight position, and wearily abandoned her efforts to raise herself, one of her feet suddenly touched some firm substance beneath it. Something narrow it was, for the other foot as yet still hung in space, but some blessed solid thing on which it was possible to stand. As, with a feeling of thankfulness and relief such as she had never before experienced, she allowed her weight to rest on it and found that it did not give, she felt a sharp blow on the knuckles of her left hand, which made her withdraw it quickly and lean against the wall to steady herself. Mark was throwing stones at her fingers to make her leave go sooner. Another missed her narrowly, and shot over her head.

She drew down her right hand, and still leaning against the wall felt about with her other foot for a support.

She soon found it, a little farther back it seemed than the first foothold; but more experimental investigation showed that it was really part of the same object. There appeared, indeed, to be several of them about, all near to the wall, so that it was plain that poor Julia, as she shot over the brink, had fallen outside, and beyond them. What the bars were that she seemed to be standing on, Juliet could not at first imagine, and it was not till Mark, growing tired of waiting for a splash that never came, reached the conclusion that his ears had deceived him, and took himself and Julia's lantern off to other spheres of usefulness, that she perceived that a faint light penetrated into the upper part of the pit. When her eyes had become accustomed to it, she was able to make out that she was perched upon a portion of the roots of a tree, which had grown in through holes in the wall.

Three great roots there were, curling into and across the shaft of the pit and disappearing down into the darkness below, where Juliet did not dare to look.

She managed, with great caution, to stoop down and catch hold of the highest of the roots, and so to settle herself in a fairly comfortable position, sitting on the middle root of the three, with her feet on the lowest, and her back against the top one.

"They might have been made on purpose," she told herself, her naturally high spirits and brave young optimism coming nobly to her rescue again.

And she set herself to try and enlarge one of the holes in the wall; but she could not make much perceptible difference there. What it had taken centuries, and the growth of a great tree to effect, could not be much improved on in an hour by one young girl, however strong the necessity that urged her.

By the time she had exhausted her efforts and must needs lean back and rest awhile, the biggest hole was just wide enough to put her hand through, and she saw no prospect of enlarging it further.

Through it she could see a corner of the loch and the grey foot of Ben Ghusy, but that was all. It showed, however, on which side of the tower she was, and she remembered the great beech that clung to the precipice below the place where the foundations of the castle sprang from the rock. At least she had always imagined it was below the foundations, but now she knew better.

She thrust her hand out and waved it, but did not dare leave it there. The terror Mark had instilled in her was too recent and too real. If she put out her hand, he would see it, and perhaps shoot it off; or at least know that he had failed to kill her as yet. Better he should think her dead, like poor Julia. But was Julia really dead?

She leant over and called down into the darkness:

"Julia! Julia!"

But no answer came, although she waited, holding her breath, and called again and again.

Then she had fallen into the water? She must be drowned even if the fall did not kill her. Poor, misguided Julia. Better dead, after all, thought Juliet, with eyes full of tears, than alive, and at the mercy of that terrible man. What disillusionments must have come to her sooner or later; final disillusionings that could not be explained away. How horrible to find that the man you loved was like that. Nothing else in the world could be so appalling. Yes, Julia was better dead. As Juliet thought of the dreadful manner in which death had come to the unfortunate girl, she forgot her faults, forgot her strange views upon the justifiability of taking human life, forgot even that she had approved of Lord Ashiel's assassination and contemplated bringing about his death herself, and remembered only the frightful nature of her punishment.

And while she sat there, clinging precariously to the twisted roots of the beech tree, Juliet's tears streamed down into the watery grave.

Hours passed, and darkness fell upon the world without. In the patch of loch that was visible to her, she could see a star mirrored; it cheered her somehow. What there was comforting about it she could not have said, but in some way it seemed to be an emblem of her hopes. She wedged herself tightly between the roots, laid her head down upon the uppermost of them, and, such is the adaptability of youth and health, slept on her dangerous perch like a bird upon a bough.

With the day she awoke, stiff and hungry. How long would it be before she was found? She felt braver under this new stimulus of hunger and more ready to risk detection by Mark. After all, he could hardly get at her here, and someone else might see her if she signalled. She took off her shoes and stockings and pushed them through the hole in the wall, then her handkerchief, and finally the white blouse she wore was taken off and thrust out between the stones. She kept her hold upon one of the sleeves, and wedged it down between the wall and the beech root, so that the blouse might hang out on the face of the rock like a flag and catch the attention of some passer-by. From time to time, too, she squeezed her hand through the gap and fluttered her fingers backward and forward. She knew that the path by the burn ran below, and it was used constantly by the ghillies and by the household. Only of course so early in the morning there was not likely to be anyone about. And she remembered with a sinking heart that people seldom look up as they walk.

Yet in the course of the day some one would surely see it. She sternly refused to allow herself to expect an immediate rescue. She would not, she told herself, begin to get really anxious about it till evening. It would be long to wait, of course. She looked at the little watch which Sir Arthur had given her on her last birthday. It was six o'clock. She must be patient.

But in spite of all her forced cheerfulness the time passed terribly slowly. She found an old letter in her pocket, and a pencil, with which

she scrawled painstaking directions for her rescue. She would push it through the hole, she thought, if she heard any sound of voices above the clamour of the burn. After that there remained nothing more to do, and the hours seemed to creep along more and more slowly, till each second seemed like a minute and each minute an hour. She tried to divert herself by repeating poetry, and doing imaginary sums; and it was about eleven o'clock, when she was in the middle of the dates of the Kings of England, that she heard Gimblet's voice hailing her in a shout from below.

It was not till after her rescue, not till after she was given safely over to the affectionate ministrations of Lady Ruth, that Juliet gave way under the strain to which she had been subjected, and broke down altogether.

Up till that moment, the urgency of her own danger had prevented her from feeling as acutely as she would have in other circumstances the terrible fate of the Russian girl; but, as soon as she herself was safe, the full horror of it settled upon her mind till thought became an agony. She was shaken by alternate fits of shuddering and weeping, until Lady Ruth, who had a scathing contempt for doctors, was on the point of sending for one.

The arrival of Sir Arthur, an hour or so after her release, did much to calm her. He had started post haste from Belgium as soon as he heard of the tragedy, which was not till three days after it had occurred, and had spent the long journey in incessant self-reproach that he had ever allowed Juliet to go alone among these murderous strangers. The sight of his familiar face was full of comfort to the distracted girl; and the knowledge that Mark was arrested and powerless to harm her, with the gladsome news that David was free again, combined to soothe her nerves and restore her self-control.

The fear of one cousin began to give place insensibly to the dread lest the other should find her red-eyed and woe-begone; and soon the importance of looking her best when David should return occupied her mind almost to the exclusion of the terrors she had experienced. Thus does the emotion of love monopolize the attention of those it possesses, so that individuals may fall thick around him and the surface of the earth be convulsed with the strife of nations, and still your lover will walk almost unconscious among such catastrophes, except in so much as they affect himself or the object of his affections.

But not yet was Juliet to see David. His mother's health had broken down under the distress and worry of the accusation brought against him, and it was to her side that he hurried as soon as he was released from prison.

While Lady Ruth carried Juliet off at once to the cottage, there to be comforted, fed, made much of and put to bed, Gimblet and the men who had assisted him in the work of rescue stayed behind in the walls of the tower, to rig up, with ropes and buckets, an apparatus by which to descend to that lowest depth of the _oubliette_ where poor Julia's body must be lying.

They had little hope of finding her alive; nor did they do so. She was floating, face downwards, in the water at the bottom of the pit.

In a grim, wrathful silence the men raised the poor lifeless body, and with some difficulty brought it back to the light of day. When the gruesome business was done, Gimblet returned to the cottage, tired out with his night's work; for, like all the men on the place, he had been scouring the moors since the previous evening, when Mark's derisive words had first sent them, hot foot, to assure themselves of Juliet's whereabouts. As he reached the cottage, the daily post bag was being handed in, and among his letters was one from the colonel of Mark's regiment:

"MY DEAR SIR," it ran, "I have sent you a wire in answer to your letter received to-day, since in view of what you say I see that it is necessary to disclose what I hoped, for the sake of the regiment, to continue to keep secret. But if, as you tell me, the innocence and even the life of Sir David Southern is involved, and you have such good reason to consider McConachan the man guilty of his uncle's death, it becomes my duty to put aside my private feelings and to confess to you that I am unable to look upon Mark McConachan as entirely above suspicion. When he was a subaltern in the regiment I have the honour to command, he was a source of grave worry and trouble to me.

"From the day he joined I had misgivings, and, though his good looks, lively spirits, and recklessness with money made him popular with others of his age, I soon discovered that his moral sense was practically nonexistent, and considered him a very undesirable addition to our ranks. Still, I hoped he might improve, and for a year or two nothing occurred to force me to take serious notice of his behaviour. Unknown to me, however, he took to gambling very heavily, and must have lost a great deal more than he could afford, for he appears to have got deep in the clutches of moneylenders long before I heard anything about it. So desperate did his financial affairs become, that shortly before he left the regiment he was actually driven to forging the name of a brother officer, a rich young man, with whom he was on very friendly terms. The large amount for which the cheque was drawn drew the attention of the bankers to it, and in spite of the extreme skill with which, I am told, the signature had been counterfeited, the forgery was detected, and the matter was brought before me.

"The victim of the fraud was as anxious as myself to avoid a public scandal, and it was arranged that nothing should be done for a year, to give time to McConachan to refund the money; if, however, he failed to do so within that time, there would be nothing for it but to make the matter public. These terms were agreed on and McConachan was told to send in his papers at once.

"The year allowed is now drawing to a close, and the money has not been forthcoming, so that there is no doubt that Mark McConachan's need of obtaining a large amount is extremely pressing. My knowledge of his character obliges me to add that I consider him one of the few men I ever knew whom I could imagine going to almost any length to provide himself

with what he so urgently requires.

"Please consider this letter confidential unless you obtain actual proof of his guilt.--I am, sir, yours faithfully,

"T. G. URSFORD,

"Colonel commanding 31st Lancers."

Gimblet put the letter away with the other items of evidence of Mark's guilt: the telegram from the analyst in Edinburgh, the measurements of the footprints on the rose-bed, and of those other marks near the hedge by which he had at first been mystified. It was another thread in the thin cord that, like the silken line Ariadne gave to Theseus, had led him to come successfully out of the bewildering labyrinth into which the investigation of the crime had beguiled him.

CHAPTER XXII

It was after dinner that night, as he sat in the little drawing-room of the cottage with Lady Ruth and Sir Arthur, that his hostess asked him to explain to them how he had contrived to detect the way in which the murder had been committed.

"You promised to tell me all about it," Lady Ruth reminded him, "if I would keep silent about your finding the papers in the statue."

"Tell us the whole thing from the beginning," Sir Arthur urged him.

"I will willingly tell you anything that may interest you," Gimblet consented readily. "Every one enjoys talking about their work to sympathetic listeners such as yourselves. It is a bad thing to start on a case with a preconceived idea, and I can't deny that when I first came here I was very near having an *_idee fixe_* as to the origin of the crime. I tried to deceive myself into thinking that I kept an open mind on the subject; but I don't think I ever really doubted for a minute that the Nihilist society to which Lord Ashiel had formerly belonged was responsible for the murder. Even after my conversation with the new peer, which showed me that things looked blacker against Sir David Southern than I had expected, I was far from convinced that he was guilty, though I was obliged to admit that there was some ground for the conclusion come to by the police.

"But what was the evidence against him? Sir David was known to have quarrelled with his uncle; he had even been heard to say he had a good mind to shoot him. But that was more than twenty-four hours previous to the crime, and the words were uttered in a moment of anger, when he probably said the first thing that came into his head. Was he likely to have hugged his rage in silence for the hours that followed, and then to

have walked out into the garden and shot his uncle in cold blood and without further warning? It did not appear to me probable, but then I did not know the young man.

"He was not to be found when the deed was discovered, and a hunt instituted for the murderer. Well, he had an answer to that which fitted in with my own theory. He said he saw some one hanging about the grounds, and went to look for him. But it was said that the night was so dark as to make it improbable that anyone should have been seen, even if there had been anyone to see. That cut both ways, to my mind. For it would account for the intruder making his escape undiscovered.

"Then there was the matter of the rifle, which he had told Miss Byrne he had cleaned that evening, in which case it had certainly been fired since then. He owned that he had locked it up and that the key never left his possession afterwards, but now denied that he had told the young lady that he had cleaned it. I asked young Lord Ashiel if he could put any possible interpretation on these facts except the one accepted by the police, and he replied that he could not. That, for the first time, made me wonder if he were really anxious to believe his cousin innocent. For I could put quite different interpretations on them myself.

"In the first place, though it was possible that Sir David lied in making his second statement to the effect that he had not said he had cleaned his rifle, it was equally possible that the first statement that he had cleaned it was not strictly accurate. For some reason, which he did not care to divulge, he might have told Miss Byrne he had been cleaning his gun when he had been really doing something entirely different. But had he told her he had cleaned it? His words, as repeated by her to me, were, 'I went in there to clean my rifle,' but not, 'I have been cleaning my rifle,' which would be another thing altogether, he probably had not yet begun cleaning it when he heard Miss Byrne coming and went out to speak to her; it is possible some feeling akin to shyness might make him reluctant to confess this afterwards in public. Indeed I now feel quite sure that this is the explanation of the matter. Later on, when I questioned her again, she did not appear certain which of the two forms of words he had used; but there was, at all events, a considerable doubt. There were other possibilities also. Some one might possess a duplicate key to the gun-cabinet. It seemed to me impossible that none of these considerations should have occurred to young Ashiel, if he were really reluctant to believe in Sir David's guilt. But at the same time I remembered the almost incredible lack of reasoning powers shown by most members of the public where a deed of violence has been committed, and knowing that there is nothing so improbable that it will not find a host of ready believers, I did not attach much importance to the circumstance until later.

"Still on the whole, after talking to young Lord Ashiel, I felt more disposed to believe that there might be some truth in the accusation that had been made than I had previously thought likely. But on that point I reserved my opinion till I should have had an opportunity of examining the scene of the tragedy for myself. So I prevailed upon the new owner of the castle to leave me alone--which he was the more ready to

do since he had urgent need to be first in examining some papers of his uncle's which were in another room--and proceeded to make a cast round the garden from which the shot had been fired, in the hope of lighting upon some trifle which had escaped the notice of Macross.

"It was when I came upon the footprints in the rose-bed which had done so much to prove the guilt of Sir David Southern in the eyes of his accusers, that I began to be certain of his innocence; and a very little examination convinced me absolutely that whoever had shot Lord Ashiel it was not his youngest nephew. For the tracks on the flower-bed left no room for doubt.

"It is true they corresponded exactly with the shooting-boots Sir David had been wearing on the day the crime was committed. I had provided myself with a pair that I was assured was exactly like those particular boots which fitted the tracks and which the police had taken away with them, and I found that there was indeed no difference, except for the matter of an extra nail or two on the soles. There was no doubt that Sir David's boots had made those impressions, but to my mind there was equally no doubt that Sir David had not been in them when they made them. For the track which was so plainly distinguishable on the soft mould of the flower-bed had certain peculiarities which I could hardly overlook.

"There was first a row of footmarks leading from the lawn to the middle of the bed; then more marks as if the wearer of the boots had moved from one position to another hard by; and finally, a track leading back again to the mossy lawn at the side. Now all this was well enough till it came to the last row of footsteps, those which led off the bed, and which had presumably been taken after the fatal shot was fired. But was it conceivable that a man who had that moment committed a cold-blooded murder should leave the scene of his crime with the same slow, deliberate footsteps with which he had approached it? Surely not.

"And yet this is what the wearer of the boots had done. The imprints, as they advanced towards the lawn, were deep and well defined from toe to heel. Not only that, but they were, if anything, closer together than those which preceded them. Now a man, running, leaves a deeper impression of his toe than he does of his heel, and his steps are much farther apart in proportion to his increase in speed. I, myself, ran from the middle of the bed, to the lawn, alongside of the footmarks of the soi-disant murderer, and though I am a short man, while Sir David's legs are reported long, I left only two footprints to his five. To me it was as certain as if I had seen it happen that the wearer of the boots trampled his way off the rose-bed as slowly as he had trampled on. Those footprints had been made by some one who was determined they should be seen, not by some one whose only thought was to get away from the place; not, in short, by a man who had that moment fired a murderous shot through the darkness. The tracks had undoubtedly been made as a blind and with the intention of diverting suspicion to the wrong man probably after the deed itself was done.

"I was satisfied, then, that the shot had not been fired from this particular part of the rose-bed, and I proceeded to search for other

footprints farther down the bed. I did not feel much hope of being successful, since, if our man had had the forethought to leave so many traces of some one else's presence, it was unlikely he would have neglected to ensure that his own should be absent. And as I expected, I found none.

"But at the end of the garden, where it is bounded by the holly hedge, I came across something which puzzled me. There were two narrow depressions on the flower-bed, about an inch wide by less than a foot long. They were parallel to each other, and at right angles to the hedge, and separated by a distance of six or seven feet. Near one, which was almost in the middle of the bed, was another mark which I could not understand. It was only a few inches long and, in shape, a narrow oval. I could not at first imagine what any of them represented, and it was only quite suddenly, as I was giving it up and going away, that the truth flashed across my mind. I had been looking regretfully at the track I myself had left by the side of the hedge on my way to and from the middle of the bed.

"What I want,' I said to myself, 'is one of those planks raised off the ground by two little supports, one at each end, that gardeners use to avoid stepping on the beds when they are going through the process of bedding out,' And even as I said it, I realized that the same idea had occurred to some one else, and that the marks I had been examining might have been made by just such a contrivance as the one I was thinking of. A short search showed me the plank itself, kept in a tool-house conveniently near the spot, and, with a rake taken from the same place, I seized the opportunity of raking out my own footmarks from the rose-bed.

"And now who could this be who had so carefully manufactured a false scent, and so cleverly avoided being himself suspected? My previous theory, that some envoy of the Nihilists had been lurking in the neighbourhood, seemed not to meet the new conditions. For how could a mere stranger have gained possession of the misleading boots, or how returned them to their proper place? And how, for that matter, could a stranger have obtained the use of Sir David's rifle, if his rifle had indeed been used?

"That brought me to consider again whether after all there was any proof that his rifle had been used by anyone. Supposing, as I saw no reason to doubt, he spoke the truth when he said that Miss Byrne had misunderstood him and that he had not cleaned the weapon since coming in from stalking, was I driven back on the theory that some one possessed a duplicate key to the case where the guns were kept? Not in the least. The shot might have been fired from a rifle that had never, at any time, been within the walls of the castle. Certainly, the bullet fitted Sir David's Mannlicher rifle, but that, as young Lord Ashiel said himself, was equally true of his own rifle, or probably of a dozen others in the neighbouring forests, since a sporting Mannlicher is a weapon in common use in the Highlands.

"The shot, then, might well have been fired by my hypothetical Russian as far as the rifle was concerned; but he would have found it difficult to borrow Sir David's boots, and it seemed unlikely that any stranger would

not only have dared to do so, but afterwards have had the audacity to return them. No, on the whole the footmarks seemed to clear the character of the Russian nation from any reasonable suspicion of being directly concerned in the crime.

"And yet, in spite of reason, I could not help feeling that the Society of the Friends of Man must be at the bottom of the whole thing in some way I had not yet fathomed. I made every inquiry as to whether any foreigner had visited the castle or been seen in the neighbourhood, but the only strangers among the visitors had been Miss Julia Romaninov and Miss Juliet Byrne's French maid, both of whose alibis appeared so far unimpeachable. I had it on Lady Ruth's authority that Miss Romaninov had been in the drawing-room with the other ladies at the time of the murder, and all the servants were at supper in the servants' hall. Otherwise I should have been inclined to look on Julia Romaninov with a suspicious eye, as being the only Russian I knew to be on the spot. The last word the dying man had been able to pronounce, too, was, according to Miss Byrne, 'steps' which might very well have been intended for steppes, and have some connection with the enemies he dreaded.

"With these considerations running in my mind, I made my way to the gun-room, not indeed with much expectation of its having anything to tell me, but as part of the day's work of inspection, which must not be shirked. I took down young Ashiel's rifle to examine. He had told me it was of the same description as his cousin's, and I was not very familiar with the make. It was owing to my wish to see for myself with what kind of weapon the deed had been done that a very important clue fell into my hands.

"As I put the rifle down on the bare deal table which forms the principal piece of furniture in the gun-room, I saw a grain of something dark, which looked like earth, fall off the butt end on to the boards beneath. I picked up the rifle, and looked closely at the butt; it was criss-crossed with small cuts, as they sometimes are, with the idea of preventing them from slipping, and in the cuts some dust, or earth, seemed, as I expected, to be adhering. I knocked the rifle upon the table, and a little shower fell from it. Except for the first grain, it might have been nothing but the ordinary dust of disuse, but I could not help thinking it was of a darker hue than the accumulations of years generally take upon themselves, and, further, I knew that the rifle had lately been used for stalking. It was, moreover, specklessly clean in every other part. I felt certain it had been leant upon the ground at no distant date; and I remembered the mark I had not been able to account for at the foot of the rose-bush, near the place where the plank had been used and, as I was persuaded, the cowardly shot actually fired. If a gun had been leant up against the large standard rose that grew there, it would have left just such a mark upon the soft ground.

"All this, of course, was a mere surmise, and rather wild at that, but the deer forests of Scotland are not muddy, whatever else they may be, and I felt an unreasoning conviction that the rifle had not accumulated dust while engaged upon its legitimate business on the mountain tops. The peaty moorland soil on which the castle stood would hardly be the best

thing in the world for rose-trees, I imagined, and it seemed not too much to hope that some other kind of earth might be artificially mingled with it. I carefully collected the dust in a pill-box, and promised myself to lose no time in obtaining the opinion of an expert analyst, as to whether or no some trace of patent fertilizer, or other chemical, could not be traced in it.

"It was now for the first time that suspicion of young Lord Ashiel began to oust my theory of the Nihilist society's responsibility for the murder. He had, as I remembered, struck me as taking his cousin's guilt for granted with somewhat unnecessary alacrity. His rifle, I already believed, perhaps in my turn with needless alacrity, had fired the fatal bullet, and it seemed perfectly possible that it was his finger that pressed upon the trigger. He was, I knew, in the billiard-room, and alone, both before and after the murder was committed. It would have been quite easy for him to fetch his rifle, place the gardener's plank in position, fire his shot and return to the house, provided Miss Byrne did not rush immediately from the room. He knew her to be a brave girl and not likely to fly without making some attempt at offering assistance. But, if she had rushed from the spot and met the murderer outside the library door, it would be simple enough to convey the impression that he had heard the shot, and that he was either dashing to their help, or making for the garden in the attempt to catch the villain red handed. The rifle was the only thing likely to provoke an awkward question, but he could have dropped it in the dark and returned for it afterwards without much fear of detection. As it happened, he thought it safer to risk carrying it indoors, and hid it under the billiard-room sofa till he had a chance to clean it and take it to the gun-room, as we now know.

"You can imagine the scene: Lord Ashiel falling forward upon the writing-table under the light of the lamp; the scoundrel leaping from his post upon the plank, but not so quickly that he did not see the girl throw herself on her knees at the side of the fallen man. I can fancy the frenzied haste with which McConachan thrust the plank into the hedge and ran like a deer towards the door, which he had no doubt left open. I imagine him, then, tiptoeing to the door of the library and bending to listen, every nerve astretch. What he heard, no doubt reassured him; it may have been the voice of the girl calling upon her father, or it may have been the thud of her body falling upon the floor when she fainted. Perhaps, even, he may have stayed outside long enough to see her sink to the ground. Then he would steal back, shut the door as gently as he had opened it, and not breathe again till he found himself in the empty billiard-room, his tell-tale rifle still in his hand. No doubt he wished he had left it in the hedge at that moment, for he must have opened the billiard-room door with most lively apprehensions. Supposing the shot had been heard, and the household was rushing to the scene of the disaster? Supposing he opened the door to find the room full of people demanding an explanation of himself and his weapon? What explanation had he ready, I wonder? It must have taken all his nerve to turn the handle of the door....

"But no one can deny the man his full share of courage and decision.

"I felt more and more sure that in some such manner the crime had been gone about; and yet there were many complications, and more than once it seemed as if my convictions had been too hastily formed. Later that same afternoon I found, upon the sand of a little bay below the castle, marks that told me as plainly as they told one of the keepers who joined me there that a strange man had landed from a boat on the night of the murder, and even, if our calculations were right, not far off the very hour in which the deed was done. From the tracks left by his boots, which were large and without nails and extraordinarily pointed for those of a man, I felt sure that here one had landed who was no native of these parts, and the theory of the unknown Russian seemed to take on new life and vigour. The tracks, as we now know, were no doubt those of the member of the Society of the Friends of Man who was living at Crianan, and who hoped to have word with Julia Romaninov. It was no doubt he whom Sir David saw lurking in the grounds, and it is natural to suppose that when he perceived himself to be observed he retreated to his boat and made off, abandoning his proposed meeting for that night.

"I was to be further bewildered before my first day of investigation came to an end. Young Lord Ashiel had spent the day in searching for the will; and, if my inward certainty that he himself would prove to be the guilty man should turn out to be right, I could very well understand that he was anxious to find it. For, from what his uncle had said to Miss Byrne, it seemed possible that he had so worded his last will and testament, that whoever succeeded to the great fortune he had to bequeath, it might not be Mark McConachan. But the will was not to be found, and there was no doubt to whose interest it was that it should never be found; so that I felt pretty sure that, if the successor to the title were once able to lay his hands on it, no one else would ever do so. However, he hadn't found it yet, or the search would not be continued with such unmistakable ardour.

"Now I had a fancy myself to have a look for the will. I took the last words of the dead man to be an effort to indicate how I was to do so, and I had no idea of prosecuting my search under the eye of his nephew. Young Ashiel was to dine at the cottage here, with Lady Ruth; so I excused myself under pretence of a headache from appearing at dinner, and hurried back to the castle as soon as I could do so unobserved. I got in by a window which I had purposely left open, and made my way to the library. The words that Lord Ashiel, as he lay dying, had managed to stammer out to his daughter, were only five. 'Gimblet--the clock--eleven--steps.' I had decided to take the clock in the library as the starting-point of investigation. He might, of course, have referred to any other clock, but only one could be dealt with at a time, and a beginning must be made somewhere. Moreover, I had noticed a curious feature about that particular timepiece. It was clamped to the wall, which struck me as very suggestive; and I thought it quite likely I should be able to discover some kind of secret drawer concealed within, or behind, the tall black lacquered case, where the will and other papers of which Lord Ashiel had told me might be hidden. But in spite of my best efforts I came across nothing of the kind.

"I then examined the floor of the room at spots on its surface which were

at a distance of about eleven steps from the clock, in the hope of finding some opening between the oak boards; but all to no purpose. I began to think that by some specially contrived mechanism the hiding-place might only be discernible at eleven o'clock, and though the idea seemed farfetched, I don't like to leave any possibility untested, so I sat down to wait till the hour should strike.

"While I was waiting, I suddenly heard footsteps which appeared to come from inside the wall of the room, or from below the floor. I concluded instantly that there was a secret passage within the walls although I had failed to find the entrance, so I left the library quickly and quietly, and made my way to the garden, from which I was able to look back into the room through the window. By the time I took up my post of observation the person I had heard approaching had entered. To my surprise it was a young lady about whom I seemed to recognize something vaguely familiar, but whom I was not aware of ever having seen before. She was occupied in examining the papers in Lord Ashiel's writing bureau, and after watching her for some time, I concluded that she must be Julia Romaninov; partly from certain foreign ways and gestures which she displayed, and partly from her present employment, as I knew of no one else who was interested in the papers of the dead man. I imagined that she knew of the possible relationship which Lord Ashiel supposed might exist between himself and her, and that she was searching for evidence of her birth. Whether she was staying at the castle, which I was told all visitors had left, or whether, like myself, she had made her way into it from outside, was a question I could not then determine, though the next day I discovered that she was stopping with Mrs. Clutsam at the fishing lodge, near by.

"The fact of her being still in the neighbourhood, the business I found her engaged upon--an unusual one, to put it mildly, for a young girl--and the hour, at which she had chosen to go about it, all gave me much food for thought, and I felt sure she could tell me news of the stranger who had landed in the bay and who wore such uncommonly pointed boots. When I recognized in her, on the following day, a young person who had, a few weeks previously, made me the victim of a barefaced and audacious robbery, I could no longer doubt that she and the unknown boatman were in league together; and, since no Englishman would be likely to wear boots so excessively pointed at the toes, I did not hesitate to conclude that they were both members of the Society of the Friends of Man, a conclusion which became a certainty when I subsequently saw them together. This discovery rather shook my belief in the guilt of young Ashiel, although I had an inward conviction that in spite of everything he would turn out to be the murderer. Still, I was after the Nihilist brotherhood as well, and I determined if possible to put a spoke in the wheel of that association when I had finished with the first and most important business.

"In the meantime, as I stood in the dark garden, watching the girl ransack the private papers of her dead host, I felt no fear of her finding what she was looking for. Lord Ashiel had convinced me that he would hide his secret affairs more carefully than that; and, as I expected, the time came when she gave up the search and departed the way she had come. And that way, to my astonishment, was through the grandfather's clock I had spent so much time in examining. No sooner had

she gone than I returned to the library, where I soon discovered that the hidden entrance lay through the one part of the clock I had not investigated. A trap in the floor could be opened by turning a small knob, and I found beneath it the top of that flight of stairs which we now know leads out to the door under the battlements. There were fifteen steps in the flight, and my first idea was to examine the eleventh one of them. I was rewarded by the discovery of a concealed drawer, which in its turn disclosed a single sheet of paper.

"On it were written some words that I could not at first understand, but of which finally, by good luck, and with your help, Lady Ruth, I was able to decipher the meaning. They referred, in an obscure and veiled fashion, to the great statue erected by Lord Ashiel in that glen of which his wife had been so fond; where the beginning of the track used by the cattle drivers and robbers of old, which is known as the Green Way, leads up over the hills to the south. Guided by Lady Ruth, I found on the pedestal of the statue a spring, which has only to be pressed when a door in one end of the erection swings open, and discloses the hollow chamber in the middle of the pedestal. At the far end of the cavity was the tin box, of which the key lay temptingly on the top. I lost no time in springing towards it, for here I felt sure was all I wanted to find, but as I inserted the key in the lock the door slammed to behind me and I found myself shut in the dark interior of the pedestal. Luckily Lady Ruth was with me, and quickly let me out. I found that the door was controlled by an elaborate piece of clockwork, which is set in motion by the pressure upon the floor of the feet of any intruder, causing the door to shut almost immediately behind him. But for you, Lady Ruth, I should be there now. But the incident gave me an idea.

"I returned to the cottage with the papers, and found two telegrams. One was from the analyst in Edinburgh to whom I had sent the grains of dust collected in the gun-room, saying that among other ingredients lime was very predominant. Now there is no lime in a peaty soil such as this, and the gardener, to whom I talked of soils and manures, with an air of wisdom which I hope deceived him, told me that the rose-bed outside the library had received a strong dressing of it. There was also, said the report, traces of steel and phosphates, of which there is a combination known as basic slag, which the gardener had mentioned as being occasionally used. I considered that it was tolerably certain, therefore, that young Ashiel's rifle had been the weapon the imprint of whose butt was still discernible on the bed when I went over it.

"The second telegram contained an answer from the colonel of his regiment, to whom I had written asking if there was anything in the record of Mark McConachan which would make it appear conceivable that he was badly in need of money, and likely to go to extreme lengths to obtain it. I had told the colonel as much about the case as I then knew, and pointed out that the life or death of a man whom I had strong reason to think innocent might depend upon his withholding nothing he might know which could possibly bear upon the matter. The telegram I received in reply was short but emphatic. 'Record very bad,' it said, 'am writing,' This was enough for me. I went over to Crianan, saw the police, and imparted my conclusions to the local inspector. I then proposed that a

little trap should be laid, into which, if he were not guilty and had no intention of destroying his uncle's will, there was no reason to imagine young Lord Ashiel would step. The inspector consented, and I returned, with himself and two of his men, to Inverashiel. You know how successful was the ruse I indulged in. I simply went to the young man, and told him I had discovered the place where his uncle had put his will and other valuable papers. I explained to him where it was and how the pedestal could be opened, but I said nothing about its shutting again. Neither, I am afraid, did I confess that I had already visited the statue and taken away the documents. I said, on the contrary, that I preferred not to touch the contents except in the presence of a magistrate, and suggested he should send a note to General Tenby at Glenkiquart to ask him to come over and be present when we removed the papers. This he did, and I then left him after he had promised to join us at the cottage in a couple of hours. I knew very well where we should find him at the end of those hours; and, as I expected, he was caught by the clockwork machinery of the pedestal door."

CHAPTER XXIII

Sir Arthur Byrne took his adopted daughter back to Belgium on the following day, since, although she would have to return to England to give evidence against Mark in due course, some time must elapse before his trial came on, and he judged it best to remove her as far as possible from a place whose associations must always be painful.

Then ensued a series of weary long weeks for Juliet, in which she had no trouble in convincing herself that David had forgotten her. She heard nothing from him directly, though indirectly news of him filtered through in letters they received from Lady Ruth and Gimblet. He had not, it appeared, taken his cousin's guilt as proved so readily as Mark had affected to do in his own case, refusing absolutely to hear a word of the evidence against him, and maintaining that the whole thing was a mistake as colossal as it was ghastly.

Only when he was persuaded unwillingly, but finally, that it was Juliet's word which he must doubt if he were to continue to believe in Mark's innocence, did he give in, and sorrowfully acknowledged himself convinced.

All this Lady Ruth wrote to the girl, together with the fact that Sir David was still in attendance on his mother, now happily recovering from the nervous shock she had sustained.

From Gimblet, and from Messrs. Findlay & Ince, they heard that by the will which the detective had found all Lord Ashiel's money and estate were left to the adopted daughter of Sir Arthur Byrne, known hitherto as Juliet Byrne, with a suggestion that she should provide for his nephews to the extent she should think fit.

The will, though not technically worded, was perfectly good and legal, and Juliet could have all the money she was likely to want for the present by accepting the offer of an advance which the lawyers begged to be allowed to make.

Gimblet wrote, further, that the list of names of members of the Nihilist society entitled the "Friends of Man" which he had discovered at the same time as the will and, contrary to Lord Ashiel's wishes, sent off by registered post to Scotland Yard, had been communicated to the heads of the police in Russia and the other European countries in which many of those designated were now scattered, with the result that a large number of arrests had been quietly made, and the society practically wiped out. The foreign guest of the Crianan Hotel was still at large. The name of Count Pretovsky was not on the list and nothing could be proved against him. He had moved on to another hotel farther west, where he was lying very low and continuing to practise the gentle art of the fisherman. A member of the Russian secret police was on his way to Scotland, however, and it was likely that Count Pretovsky would be recognized as one of the persons on Lord Ashiel's list who were as yet unaccounted for.

Gimblet told them, besides, that he had succeeded in finding the widow of the respectable plumber named Harsden, whom Julia had mentioned as being her father. Mrs. Harsden corroborated the story, and said that it was certainly the Countess Romaninov to whom Mrs. Meredith had consigned the little girl they had given her.

Widely distributed advertisements also brought to light the nurses of the two children; both the nurse who had taken Julia out to Russia and the woman who had been with Mrs. Meredith when she took over the charge of the McConachan baby, quickly claiming the reward that was offered for their discovery. There was no longer any room for doubt that Juliet Byrne was the same person as Juliana McConachan, or that Julia Romaninov had begun life as little Judy Harsden.

All this scarcely sufficed to rouse Juliet from the apathy into which she had fallen. To her it seemed incredible to think with what excitement and delight such news would have filled her a few months earlier.

Now, since David plainly no longer cared for her, nothing mattered any longer. Her depression was put down to the shock she had suffered, and efforts were made to feed her up and coddle her, which she ungratefully resented.

She had nothing in life to look forward to now, so she told herself, except the horrible ordeal of the trial which she would be obliged to attend.

It was in the dejection now becoming habitual to her, that she sat idly one fine October morning in her little sitting-room at the consulate. She had refused to play tennis with her stepsisters, not because she had anything else to do, but because nothing was worth doing any more, and because it was less trouble to sit and gaze mournfully through the open

window at the yellow leaves of the poplar in the garden, as from time to time one of them fluttered down through the still air.

How unspeakably sad it was, she thought to herself, this slow falling of the leaves, like the gradual but persistent loss of our hopes and illusions, which eventually make each human dweller in this world of change feel as bare and forlorn as the leafless winter trees.

On a branch a few feet away, a robin perched, and after looking at her critically for a few moments lifted up its voice in cheerful song.

But she took no heed of it, and continued to brood over her sorrows.

All men were faithless. With them, it was out of sight, out of mind, and she would assuredly never, never believe in one again. The best thing she could do, she decided, was to put away all thought of such things, and forget the man whom she had once been so vain as to imagine really cared for her.

And just as she told herself for the hundredth time that she had given up all hope and had resigned herself to the role of broken-hearted maiden, the door opened, and David was shown in.

By good luck, she was alone. Lady Byrne was not yet down, and her stepsisters were out; so there was no one to see her blushes and add to her embarrassment.

In the surprise of seeing him, all her presence of mind vanished, leaving her speechless and trembling with agitation.

For his part, David approached her with a confusion as obvious as her own.

"Juliet," he stammered as soon as they were left alone together, "I know I oughtn't to have come, but I simply couldn't keep away."

"Why oughtn't you to have come?" was all she could ask foolishly.

"Because I know you can't want to see me," said the absurd young man, "though I do think you liked me pretty well before, didn't you? when Maisie Tarver tied my tongue; or ought to have, I'm afraid I should say. But she had enough sense to drop me when I was arrested. She couldn't stand a man arrested for murder any more than you or anyone else could?"

He said the last words with an air of shamefaced interrogation.

"Why," said Juliet, who was being carried off her feet on the top of a rapturous flood, "what nonsense! You were as innocent as I was. What would it matter if you were arrested twenty times!"

"Well, I shouldn't care to be, myself," said David, without apparently deriving much satisfaction from such a suggestion. "Once is enough for me. And anyway," he added inconsequently, "you can't very well marry a

fellow who is first cousin to a man who's as good as hanged already!"

"Oh, David, David," cried Juliet; "as if that mattered! But who do you suppose I am--don't you know that he's my first cousin just as he is yours?"

"By Jingo," said David, "I never thought of that, somehow. Then we're both in the same boat!" And he stepped forward and caught her by the hands.

"Yes, David," she said, as he drew her to him tenderly, "both in the same boat. And what can be nicer than that?"

THE END

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