CONVICT 99.

CHAPTER I

THE LOVERS

"GERALDINE, listen— I love you! I have loved you for months, but have never dared to tell you, because you were so beautiful, so delicate, so far above me. You have been brought up in luxury, while I—only a few years ago I was working in a dark, grimy Lancashire town, where I was born, and where my parents lived and worked humbly before me. But those dark factory towns breed hearts as true as ever came out of palaces; and, Geraldine, with all my true heart I love you."

The man who spoke these passionate words, and the girl to whom they were addressed, were standing in one of the conservatories of Fenton Court, the large and picturesque gabled house in Hampstead that was the home of Mr. Christopher Lucas, the rich city merchant. There was a ball at his house that night, at which his motherless daughter, Geraldine, reigned both as hostess and as belle; and so much was she sought after, so eagerly did men compete for the honour and delight of a word, a look, a smile, from her, that it was only with difficulty that Laurence Gray had led her apart for a moment from the brilliant crowd into the stillness and shadow of the farthest conservatory.

She stood there now among the waving palms and massed azaleas, one of the loveliest women, surely, that ever graced this earth. Her eyes were of that rare velvety violet that is as if a heart's case had been set under the blue-veined, satin lid, and the soft masses of her hair glistened like gold. The skin of her bare arms and shoulders gleamed pure, white, and smooth as marble against the shadowy background of dark leaves.

Her figure was tall, and its beautiful curves were
clearly shown by the exquisite dress of faintest primrose silk, that fell about her in a mystery of subtle folds, and trailed in shining billows behind her on the mosaic floor. She was, as yet, scarcely nineteen, but she had the ripened dignity and grace of a young princess.

The man who stood before her, waiting for her reply, looked worthy of any woman's love. His face, glowing now with the ardour of a passion and tenderness inexpressible in words, was at once refined and strong. His handsome brown eyes looked out, fearlessly, from under straight dark brows, and the noble forehead above was crowned with thick curling hair of a rich dark brown.

There needed but one glance at those frank eyes to know that his nature was brave and loyal, and his heart a prize of whose winning even the best of women might be proud.

"Geraldine," he pleaded, as she delayed to speak, "won't you answer me?"

She looked up then, half tenderly, half shyly.

"I will give you your answer to-morrow," she said.

"Come in the evening. I am too hurried now. I cannot think in all this movement, and music, and glare, and this question that you have asked me is a question that I dare not answer lightly." She paused a moment. Then she said, in a changed tone: "Take me back to my guests, Laurence. We have been here long enough. Father will be wondering where I am."

Laurence! She had never called him by this name before. Thrilled with a stronger hope, he did as she wished, and led her back to the noisy, laughing crowd. Already, before they had left the conservatory, the harmonious beat of the music reached them, and the rhythm of the dancers' feet. He thought her hand trembled on his arm. But she said nothing.

Everyone looked at them as they re-entered the ballroom; all eyes seemed to be searching their faces, trying to read what had occurred between them.

Mr. Lucas himself, a short, stout, kind-looking old gentleman, with white hair, hurried up to them, accompanied by a dark-bearded young man, who bore the name of Ralph Vickers. This Mr. Vickers addressed Geraldine
Lucas familiarly, as one who knew her well, and it was noticeable that she, who was all sweetness and gentleness, turned from him coldly and with few words, while the smile that had hovered like fleeting sunshine about her lovely mouth died suddenly away.

CHAPTER II

LAURENCE GRAY TELLS HIS STORY

It was eight o'clock on the following evening when Laurence Gray rang at the entrance of Fenton Court, and was shown into the familiar gold and white drawing-room. Geraldine Lucas was there alone, waiting for him. She was in her dinner-dress, and its dark purple richness set off her wonderful beauty better even than the tender primrose silk had done on the night before. Her face was changed a little, too; it was softer, sweeter, more radiant. As soon as he met her eyes Laurence knew what answer she would give.

"Dearest! oh, my dearest!" he exclaimed, in his sudden, uncontrollable gladness and thankfulness.

She let him clasp her in his arms and hold her close against his breast.

"I knew last night that I loved you," she whispered, "only I could not tell you then. It was too sudden."

"My darling," he said, in a low, broken voice, "oh, what have I ever done that such happiness should be given to me; that this world, so dark for others, should be made for me a paradise of sunshine?"

"You have been brave, and true, and noble, Laurence," she answered, drawing back her head so that he might see the proud light of admiration shining in her eyes. "You have been better than other men."

"No, no," he interrupted, stepping with a kiss the torrent of tender praise that flowed from her shyly smiling lips. Then, with his arm about her waist, he led her to a seat, and sat down by her side.

"Geraldine," he began, bending forward so that he might watch the expression of her face, "before you
pledge yourself to me, before I can accept, with a free conscience, the treasure of your love, I must tell you something about myself. With your beauty and wealth you might marry a man very high up in the social scale. Your position is far better than mine, you know. If you marry me the world will say you have stooped too low, have thrown yourself away. Perhaps, even, your father will think that I have entrapped your love—that I am mercenary and presumptuous—"

"Don't be unjust to papa, Laurence," she broke in, smiling. "I have already told him that I love you, and he is glad."

"He is glad!" exclaimed Laurence Gray joyfully. "How good he is! As kind a father as he is a friend. He thinks more of your happiness Geraldine, than of all the wealth and state in the world; it must be so if he allows you even to think of marrying me. But, dearest," he bent his serious face down close to hers, "did he tell you all that he has done for me—how, ever since I was a child, he has helped and protected me?"

The beautiful girl looked up with wondering eyes.

"No," she said slowly, "he has told me nothing of that. But I should like to hear it."

"You shall hear it, darling," returned Laurence resolutely, "you shall hear it now from me. You only know me as I am here in London, as manager in your father's office. But there have been days in Lancashire when have nearly starved. It would not be right for me to marry you—you so daintily, so delicate—without telling you of those days."

"Where is the shame in having been poor?" the girl asked, smiling. "My father was poor, too, when he began life."

"I know, dearest, I never thought there was shame in it. I only want to tell you everything, so that you may know what man it is that you are taking for your husband. You have never seen any but beautiful places open to the sunlight, and made pleasant by wealth. You have no idea of a town where the walls and streets are grimy, and hundreds of high, black chimneys pour forth dense clouds of black smoke that veil the sky.
It was in a place like that that I was born—in Blackburn.
My father was a weaver, but I don’t remember him very well. He died when I was three years old, leaving my poor mother to support herself and me. She was the handsomest woman I had ever seen until I first saw you. Our Lancashire towns can boast vastly pretty women, in spite of their grime and dirt."

"Have you a picture of your mother, Laurence?"
Geraldine asked eagerly.

"Yes, dearest. If you would like to see it, I’ll bring it with me the next time I come. But your father could tell you how pretty my mother was before her bitter struggles made her face too sad."

"Oh," cried Geraldine, "did he see her?"

"Yes, he had business in Blackburn, and used often to come there, and somehow—I think it was through the master of our factory—he got to know my mother, and used to help her. She was in delicate health, and could not work much—not always enough to keep us both, and when she was ill, it was your father who kept us from starving. That was when I was too young to work. Afterwards, when I was old enough, I went into the factory. I was a weaver for a long time, and then I rose to be a cut looker. I worked very hard. My darling, although I didn’t know it, I was working for you, to bring myself into a position in which I should meet you, and love you, and win you?"

"Did you ever think of love, then Laurence?"

"Yes, dearest. Men and women think of love in all places, and in all classes of life. I thought of it as a great blessing that might one day be mine, and I tried to make myself worthy of it. In the evenings I used to go to the Free Library and read and think: and your father, when he came to Blackburn, brought me books. At last, when I was twenty-three, he got me promoted to be an overseer at the factory. But soon after that my mother died. I was alone in the world."

Geraldine laid her delicate hand on his shoulder.

"Poor Laurence!" she said.

And the tender sympathy in her face made the colour deepen in his handsome one.
"Then your father came to me," he went on, holding her hand captive against his breast. "He offered to give me a place in his own office in London. There was nothing to keep me in Blackburn any longer, my mother being dead, and I accepted his offer gladly. You know how it has been with me since—how I have tried by hard and faithful work to show him some gratitude for his life long kindness to me. Dearest, but for his help my mother must have died years before, and I, a poor little orphan boy, would have been left dependent upon public charity. Whereas now I have strength and a position, and—oh, greatest of all riches!—you, my darling, when I think of how beautiful and how sweet you are, all that I am, all that I have, seems as nothing to offer you. What can I do to prove to you the greatness of my love? If you will bend down to me, and try to teach me how to go even a little way towards becoming your equal I will worship, be faithful to you always."

"As I will be faithful to you," she broke in solemnly.

"He started at the seriousness of her tone.

"Geraldine, what has changed you so suddenly? You look quite sad."

"It was an old feeling that came over me," she answered, her eyes growing troubled. "A presentiment that we should need all our faithfulness—that our love for each other would be put to a terrible and bitter test. It can't be so, can it, Lawrence? Nothing can come between us now?"

"No—no." He spoke guilty pressing her hand closer against his breast. "You must not let such fancies come into your head. Why—look, dear!—is not that your father stealing away on tiptoe—there in the conservatory?"

He was right, as her laugh instantly told him. The kindly old man had come to take a peep at the lovers from the curtained archway that led from the drawing-room into the conservatory. At the sound of his daughter's recalling voice, he turned and came towards the half embarrassed pair.

"So I'm to have you for a son-in-law, sir? Well,
well, it's not quite unexpected. You've been a good fellow, and I've long thought of making you a junior partner, and we'll get along famously. I've known you from your childhood, and, after all, I'd sooner trust her with you than with any other man I've met."

"I will deserve your confidence, Mr. Lucas," replied Laurence, in a voice that shook a little with happiness and emotion. "Before God, I will!"

The old merchant looked at him with a glistening eye—looked at them both, and saw how well fitted they were for each other; he so handsome and frank of face, she so fair and sweet.

"Will you play us something, Geraldine?" he asked presently.

She went to the piano and began to play, as requested. But instead of the joy-song, the outburst of melodic gladness that both father and lover had expected, there came from under her graceful fingers a slow mournful refrain, sounds as of subdued wailing that presently rose and swelled into a wild passionate lament, a flood of heart-breaking sorrow. Suddenly, abruptly, the music ceased, and the player burst into tears.

"Geraldine!" exclaimed her father anxiously, "what is this?"

She looked up, dashed aside her tears, and tried to smile.

"I am very foolish, I know," she said apologetically, "but it seemed as if my happiness were too great to last. I tried to play something joyful, but the notes wouldn't come, while those horrible strains of sadness seemed to form themselves under my hands."

"Dearest, you must not imagine such things," said Laurence, with tender reproach. "I could almost say that it is unkind of you so to spoil our first happy hours."

"Poor girl!" smiled Mr. Lucas playfully. "I suspect the excitement of this evening has disturbed her nerves. Too much gladness is sometimes as bad as grief in its effects upon the mind."

Laurence glanced at the clock.

"It is time for me to go," he said regretfully. "But
I must not regret even that. I know I am the happiest man anywhere on earth to-night."

"What it is to be young and in love!" laughed Mr. Lucas.

"By the way," said Laurence, "as I was coming here this evening, I met Ralph Vickers, and he asked to be remembered to you, Geraldine."

"Did he?" cried the old merchant, with an approving nod. "A very worthy young fellow is Vickers—a very worthy young fellow indeed."

"I think so, too," rejoined Laurence. "We get along well together in the office. He's a smart man of business."

"I dislike and mistrust him," interposed Geraldine.

"Do you, dear?" said her father, surprised. "Odd what prejudices women have! Why, I'm sure you oughtn't to dislike him, for he likes you exceedingly well—rather too well for his peace, I think, now that young Gray here has got the better of him with you."

Laurence joined in the old gentleman's laugh.

"I'm sorry for him," he said earnestly. "It must be a very bitter thing to have loved and lost you, Geraldine."

He took her hand to bid her good-night. At this moment Mr. Lucas considerately rose and strolled out of the room.

"Good-night, my darling—my beloved—my queen! There is no word tender enough to express what my heart would call you, Geraldine."

"Good-night," she whispered in return. "This has been the sweetest evening of my life. And yet, somehow, I am afraid—I am afraid—"

"Afraid of what, sweetheart?"

"That there is evil coming to you. I am sure of it. I feel it in the air about me," she said; as she spoke she glanced half-shudderingly round the large, brightly-lighted room.

"Darling, it is nothing." He wondered at her mood. "You are over-excited. You will sleep all those fancies away, and to-morrow we will laugh at them together."

"It may be so," she returned doubtfully. "I pray that it may be so."
"It will be so," he said, with a reassuring smile.
"And now, good-night."
"Good-night."
He bent down and laid his lips on hers, clasping her closely the while. For one long, delicious, sacred moment they stood thus. Then he gently freed her, and, with many backward glances, left the room.
Mr. Lucas was waiting for him in the hall.
"Good-night, Laurence," he said, in his kindly hearty voice.
They shook hands, and Laurence Gray then went out.
The night was clear and starlit, and the air on those northern heights of London pure and strong. The night wind blew on his flushed face, cooling it; but no outward cold could lessen the wild fever of rapture that was burning in his heart. Oh, to possess at last the love of the woman he had for so long adored, how sweet it was! His very veins were afire with the joy of it.
He looked up at the stars—those golden scintillating stars, that shone as gloriously over London on this night as ever they could have shone over lovely southern Verona on the night when Romeo waited in the fragrant gardens to speak with Juliet. If, indeed, as men of science said, those myriad shining worlds were peopled, could there be in them all one creature as happy, as blessed as he—Laurence Gray—was now on this lower earth?
He felt there could not be.
He looked before him, and out of the clear deep air Geraldine's face seemed to start—her face, tender, lustrous, radiant with a beauty whose possession a king well might envy. And then he saw in fancy the long sweet years of the future, in which they would be together. How he would work for her! Everything he did, everything he thought, should be consecrated to her service. For her sake his labour in the world should be the best that a man could do. And so he would rise higher and higher, until at last his name should be known and honoured of all men, and she would own that, even in a worldly sense, she had done well to trust to the promise that was in him.
Oh, beautiful face, shining out against the night shadows, leading him on. What could it not spur a man to do—a face like that in his house, at his side for ever?

Suddenly the vision faded, and in its stead a dark form, all too real, all too prosaic, advanced from the gloom towards him. A lantern light flashed in his face.

"I beg your pardon, sir; are you Mr. Laurence Gray?"

Laurence, astonished, stared at the man who accosted him. The light from a neighbouring lamp-post showed him to be an utter stranger.

"Laurence Gray is my name," he answered quietly.
"What is it you want with me? I don't know you."
"I dare say not, sir. But you'll find out all about it if you'll just step down to the police-station with us. Jim," he added, turning to a man who stood behind in the shadow. "It's all right. Come on."

Laurence Gray drew back half-angrily
"Why should I go with you? There is some mistake here," he cried.
"No mistake at all, sir," retorted the stranger dryly.
"We've been looking for you all the evening. And we're two of us, so it's no good your making any resistance."

"I shall not attempt to resist you, if it comes to that," rejoined Laurence quietly. "But I think that before I go with you I have a right to understand what authority you have for interfering with me."

"You'll learn that soon enough," said the man who had accosted him. "Come on, and no more parleying. We can't stand here talking all night."

Laurence reflected,

"Very well," he decided presently. "I'll come. Fortunately it is not far from here to the station, and the sooner I go with you, the sooner this mystery will be cleared up."

They were then at the top of the Hampstead High Street, and ten o'clock was striking from the church clock close by.

Laurence Gray hastened his pace. The two men.
walked on either side of him. Within a few minutes the police-station was reached.

"Now," said Laurence, when they had entered it, "what am I wanted for?"

One of the men answered grimly:

"You are arrested."

"Arrested! For what? On what charge?"

The answer came as grimly as before:

"Wilful murder."

"Murder!" Laurence echoed the word in startled horror.

"Yes," said the second man, who had not before spoken. "Here's the warrant for your arrest. You are arrested on suspicion of having wilfully murdered Charles Kesteven.

CHAPTER III

THE GOSPEL OAK TRAGEDY

With a firm step Laurence Gray entered the prisoner's dock in the sombre hall of the Central Criminal Court, indicted for the wilful murder of Charles Kesteven. He pleaded "Not Guilty."

The few weeks that had passed since the night of his arrest in Hampstead—that all too happy night of his betrothal to the beautiful Miss Lucas—had been to him as years of painful anguish. The reading of the warrant—to him so incomprehensible—at the very moment when his joy was at its fullest; his first weary night in custody; his removal in the dismal prison-van from the police-station to the court in which was held the inquest on the body of the man he was presumed to have killed, and his transference thence to the gloomy old House of Detention, all appeared as a horrible dream. Next had come the tedious and the more public disgrace of the magisterial inquiry. He had felt confident that the evidence given at this inquiry would substantiate his innocence, and bring about his discharge. After the blow of the verdict of wilful
murder here returned against him, he had been consigned to a thick-walled cell in Newgate, where the long dreary days and nights, filled with harrowing doubts and anxieties concerning the result of his trial, had been as terrible to endure as any bodily torture.

But the crucial hour had come at last. He stood before the tribunal of his fellow-countrymen, and conscious of his absolute guiltlessness, and innocence, of the horrible crime with which he was charged, he felt certain that the truth must now inevitably be made known, and that very soon he would again lift his head proudly among men—scarceless, stainless, and free.

He looked straight before him at the judge, keenly, unwaveringly. His lordship was a broad-shouldered, comfortable man, whose judicial wig covered a full round head, and whose ruddy countenance appeared to be that of a kindly, well-to-do country gentleman. Laurence Gray read leniency in the blue eyes that surveyed him from over a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and his hope rose higher. His estimate of the twelve jurymen, who sat in a double row at his left, was less rapidly made. The foreman was a black-browed furrier of Cheapside, whose severe aspect was not encouraging.

From the jury he looked into the body of the court at the numerous gentlemen in wigs, busily coming their briefs, or sitting with heads together whispering. In the reporters’ bench, directly opposite the jury box, sat a pinch-nosed, grey-haired veteran, calmly inserting his sheets of carbon paper between the leaves of his blank “flimsies.”

The prisoner was himself the centre towards which all other eyes were directed. From the little gallery above his head a wave of whisper reached him, as those of the public who had succeeded in gaining admission leaned over the rail, that they might see at least the curly brown hair and the candid white forehead of the man whose life, perhaps, depended upon the issue of that day’s trial.

Wearing the same neat frock-coat and dark check trousers that he had worn on the night when he had
paid his last visit to the home of the woman he loved, he still looked the honest and handsome Lancashire lad of whom his beloved had said:

“You have been brave and true, Laurence. You have been better than other men.”

But his cheeks were thinner and paler now than they had been in that hour of his supreme joy, and his clear brown eyes had lost some of their lustre.

But they regained it for a moment when he saw his betrothed enter the court, conducted by his own solicitor. Eagerly he scanned her face as she turned it towards him. It was pale, but its pallor hardly lessened her uncommon loveliness, making her sorrowful eyes look larger and more luminous even than their wont. The gaze of the whole court was upon her, as, wrapped in a long fur-trimmed grey velvet cloak, she passed to her seat behind the jury box. Laurence felt his heart beat quicker as he watched her. She had not changed towards him. Even across the distance those tender eyes of hers told him she trusted him and bade him have no fear.

The leading counsel for the prosecution—a tall man, whose black beard contrasted strangely with his white wig—rose to open the case for the Crown. A deep silence, broken only by the speaker’s sonorous voice, and the scratching of many pens, fell upon the court.

He said that the prisoner was charged with the wilful murder of Charles Kesteven on the evening of Wednesday, February 15th. He thought, he said, that the evidence would very clearly show that the murder, by whomsoever committed, had been a premeditated one, and the circumstances under which the crime had been perpetrated would in evidence clearly connect themselves with the prisoner.

The deceased gentleman, who was forty-five years of age, was a respected and prosperous accountant, having offices in the City of London, and living in a suburban villa of his own in Hampstead. Evidence would be adduced proving that in the course of his professional work he had been engaged for the two or three days prior to the time of his murder in auditing
the commercial accounts of Messrs. Christopher Lucas and Co., of which well-known firm the prisoner was the business manager. In this connection it would be shown that the prisoner had a very distinct motive for arresting the completion of that audit. He was in love with the daughter of his employer. On the very evening of the murder he was present at a ball at Fenton Court, the residence of Mr. Christopher Lucas in Hampstead. On the night of his arrest he had asked for the hand of his master's daughter in marriage. It was, therefore, to his personal interest that the condition of the accounts under his charge should not be discovered. Even had the present proceedings been uncalled for, it was probable that the prisoner would have been brought up charged with a different crime.

Coming to the murder itself, counsel stated that the deceased, on the evening on which he met his death, quitted his office at an unusually early hour, leaving the City by the North London train, which started from Broad Street Station at 4.27. The carriage in which he travelled was a first-class one, and on arriving at Gospel Oak, twenty minutes afterwards, it contained three occupants—Angus Macintyre, who would be called as a witness, Charles Kesteven himself, and the prisoner. Macintyre who resided in Highgate had alighted from the train at Gospel Oak Station. The night was foggy.

Here the learned counsel paused, and looked fixedly at Laurence Gray. Then, drawing up his silk gown about his shoulders, and placing his right hand upon his open brief, he continued:

"At the next station—namely, Hampstead Heath, which was reached at 4.52, the train being three minutes late—the prisoner was seen hurriedly leaving the platform. Ten minutes afterwards he was at his lodgings in Well Lane. Again, three hours later, he appeared at the ball at Fenton Court. The footboard of the railway carriage he had so hurriedly left was found to be spattered with blood. In the carriage itself there were more blood-stains, also a gold cuff-link. The cuff-link will be identified as having belonged to the deceased.

"In the meanwhile, Charles Kesteven, who had bee
invited to the ball at Fenton Court, did not arrive. His family, believing him to have gone to the ball straight from town, were not alarmed by the fact that he had not returned home before midnight. But on discovering that his evening dress clothes had not been removed from the drawer of his wardrobe, they caused inquiries to be made. On the following morning, the fog having cleared, his dead body was found lying on the embankment of the down line, midway between the stations of Gospel Oak and Hampstead Heath. In his breast, penetrating the left lung, there was a very formidable long-bladed dagger.

"That dagger would be identified as the property of the prisoner.

"When arrested, the prisoner steadfastly denied all knowledge of the crime. It remained for the jury to consider the evidence, which would now be set before them, and so give their verdict accordingly."

Laurence Gray stepped back in the dock once again, utterly amazed at the array of startling, apparently conclusive facts that had been so dexterously marshalled against him. He sank into a chair that stood near him. His brain whirled in its perplexity. He looked across at Geraldine. What did she think now?

As the first witness for the prosecution was called, he again stood up. He read no sympathy now in the eyes of the spectators, but only cold, un pitying curiosity.

The veteran reporter laid down his writing-style, and turned to his companion of the Fleet Street Gazette.

"How was it you didn't turn up last night at the Cheshire Cheese, Jack?" he said.

"Too busy," was the reply. "I had to go across and do that bloomin' fire in the Old Kent Road. Wrote a full column, and then best if the sub-editor didn't cut it down to a two-inch par!"

"Ay, it's always the way. Well"—when the witness had been sworn—"at it again"

The first witness stated that he was the head clerk in the office of the deceased accountant until after his master's death he had taken no part in auditing the books of Messrs. Christopher Lucas and Co. But he under-
stood that in going over the accounts Mr. Kesteven had discovered some serious discrepancies. There was a total deficiency to the amount of £758; the last embezzlement had occurred on December 3rd, and was to the extent of £224. Mr. Kesteven had at once communicated these facts to the prisoner, who, as manager of Mr. Lucas's firm, might, he believed, be able to explain the matter.

"Had all the books been examined when that communication was made?" asked the counsel.

"No. Those of the manager himself had not yet been seen. They were stated to be in constant use, and could not then be removed. On the afternoon of February 15th—the date of the murder—the prisoner came to our office and had an interview with my master. What took place between them I do not know. But I heard the prisoner protesting."

"What did he say? Give his exact words as you remember them."

"He said: 'It is impossible, Kesteven. You must have made some oversight. You can't surely, imagine that there has been an embezzlement?' Then the deceased said: 'That's exactly what I do imagine, Mr. Gray. And when I see the other books, I think I shall be able to put my finger on the guilty party.'"

"What followed after that?"

"The prisoner and the deceased went out. I heard the prisoner mention something about taking it over in the train."

"You swear to that?"

"I do."

The witness went on to say that after the death of his master he had received instructions from Mr. Lucas to continue the examination of the books. Three days afterwards, he made his full statement of the accounts, showing that the defalcations occurred in the books which had been kept by the prisoner. There were marks of erasure in several instances in the money columns. Certain figures had been altered, with entries which did not appear in the other books.

The books in question were produced in court for the
inspection of his lordship and the jury, who appeared to agree as to the correctness of the witness’s statements. Mr. Christopher Lucas was then called.

“I have known the prisoner,” he said, “since he was a mere child. I trusted him as I would have trusted a son. I never suspected him of any wrong-doing. Indeed, so greatly did I honour his integrity, that on the evening of February 16th last, in consenting to his marriage with my daughter, I also promised to make him a partner in my business. Until the events occurred which have led to this trial, I knew absolutely nothing against him.”

“Then these events have altered your opinion regarding the prisoner?”

“With regard to the alleged embezzlements perhaps.”

“If you had known of them earlier, would you have permitted his engagement to your daughter?”

“I should have hesitated without proof of his innocence.”

“Are you satisfied that the embezzlements referred to were the act of the prisoner?”

Mr. Lucas turned his eyes in the direction of the dock. Laurence Gray met them unflinchingly. But the facts were against him.

“I regret to say that, since examining the books, that is my impression.”

The accused man recited with an exclamation of dismay.

“On the evening of the ball at your house, or on the evening following that one, did you observe anything unusual in the prisoner’s demeanour?”

“Nothing beyond the very natural excitement of mind which a young man may be expected to exhibit on being accepted by the woman he loves. In other respects he was exactly as I had always known him to be.”

“On that second evening did the prisoner mention anything in your presence concerning the finding of the body of the deceased?”

“It was mentioned for an instant; but as my daughter was present I did not wish the subject to be pursued.”

Angus Macintyre was the next witness examined.
"On the afternoon in question," he said, with a distinctly northern accent, "I startit from Broad Street by the twenty-seven minute past four train. In the same carriage were two other passengers, who got out at Camden Toon. From Camden Toon to Gospel Oak there were the deceased gentleman, the prisoner, and myself. I took nae notice of what they were speakin' aboot, but that it was something of their accounts that had gone agley. There was naething that might lead a body to suppose that there was any ill will between them. They sat in opposite corners at the platform side of the compartment."

"You swear that the prisoner was the man you saw?"

"Yes. He sat with his back to the engine. The night was just as foggy as it could be and I was in a hurry to get out at Gospel Oak, for my man Geordie was waitin' me with the machine, and your London fogs are good for neither body nor beast."

"The machine? What's that?"

"I believe that is a Scotticism—meaning his carriage," observed the judge.

The learned counsel acknowledged the information with a bow, and continued his examination.

"You identified the body of the deceased at the time of the coroner's inquest, I think, and recognised it as that of the man who had sat in the same carriage with yourself and the prisoner?"

"Exactly. Yes."

"In alighting from the train you had to pass between them?"

"Yes."

"Leaving them both in their seats?"

"To the best of my belief, but I did not turn to observe if either of them alighted."

Here Laurence Gray leaned forward as if about to speak. A glance from his solicitor restrained him.

"This is an important point," said the counsel.

"Do you swear that the prisoner did not get out at Gospel Oak?"

"I cannot swear to what I do not know. I was one of the first to step upon the platform when the
train stopped, and, the first-class carriages being in the middle of the train, the pass-gate was immediately opposite to me. I was not on the platform more than about half a minute.”

A ticket-collector was then examined, and he stated that, on the Wednesday in question, at 4:52 p.m., the prisoner, who was a season ticket holder, passed him at the barrier at Hampstead Heath Station. He appeared to be in a great hurry. The witness would probably not have noticed him on that evening but for the fact that the prisoner had arrived by an earlier train than was usual with him. He knew the prisoner well, as he had frequently received tips from him.

The superintendent of the police-station, who had taken charge on the night of Laurence Gray’s arrest, gave evidence to the effect that on asking the prisoner a few questions relative to the murder of which he was accused, the prisoner had stated emphatically that he had left the deceased alive and well in the railway carriage at Gospel Oak Station, and that his own purpose in leaving the carriage was to look in one of the other compartments for a friend whom he believed to be in that same train. Not finding him before the train started, he had jumped into a second-class carriage as the train began to move.

The same witness, in continuing his evidence, stated that in searching the prisoner he had found in the inside pocket of his overcoat a fragment of a white silk neckcloth. The neckcloth was stained with blood. At the sight of this article the prisoner had paled. He declared that he knew nothing about it, but refused to make any further explanations.

The fragment of silk was produced in court. The judge and jury examined it, and shook their heads wisely. It was identified by the next witness, the widow of the deceased, and, together with the cuff-link that had been found in the railway carriage, it was declared by her to be the property of her late husband. The neckcloth from which the fragment had been torn had not been found.

Four other witnesses for the prosecution remained
yet to be examined. These were a platelayer, who had discovered the body of the murdered man; the surgeon who had made the post-mortem examination; a railway official, who deposed to having seen the blood upon the carriage footboard; and an office-boy.

The deceased had been found on the morning after the murder lying at the bottom of the railway embankment, midway between the two stations. The body was much shattered by the fall from the train. Sticking in the breast there was a large knife, the blade penetrating the left lung. The weapon was produced. It was observed that Laurence Gray was strangely agitated at the sight of it. He looked astonished, perplexed.

James Stinchcombe, an office-boy in the employ of Mr. Christopher Lucas, was then called.

The examining counsel asked him to describe the desk in the private office of the prisoner.

"'Twere a moyorginy desk, sir," said the boy, "with twisty-twirly legs, and a shiny top wot yer could see yer face in. There were a hink-pot and ever so many pens and sealin'-waxes, and a paiper-knife."

"Can you describe the paper-knife?"

"Yas; 'tweren't a hordnary paiper-knife, though Mr. Gray he used it as sich. If ye arst me, it were one of them there knives wot yer read of in 'Daredevil Dick, or the Boy Chief of the Rocky Mountains.' You know, sir, don't yer?"

"Perhaps the witness means a bowie-knife," remarked the learned judge.

"Yas," said the witness; "right you are, sir; a bowie-knife. And Mr. Gray he ses to me one after-noon: 'James,' ses he, 'yer take a great hinteres' in that 'ere knife of mine, it seems.' 'Yas,' says I; 'it's a scalpin' knife, ain't it, sir? Leastways, it might be, on'y it ain't 'arf sharp enough.' So 'e told me as 'tweren't that at all, but on'y a sham 'un as 'ad bin used in a theayter.'"

"Would you recognise the knife if you saw it?"

"Arst yerself the question! Didn't I 'ave it in my 'and every mornin' wen I were a dustin' of the desk?"
The weapon was then handed to the witness, who took it in his hand and turned it over.

"That's the very knife," said he. "Then in surprise:

"Wy, some chap's bin a-sharpenin' of it!"

"You swear to the fact that it was not in its present state when you last saw it?"

"That I do; for the last time I seen it were on the day before the murder, when Mr. Vickers were in the manager's office. Mr. Vickers, 'e were talkin' to Mr. Gray about a letter as I were to take to the accountant's. And as 'e stood by the desk 'e 'eld the knife in 'is two 'ands, and were a-resting of 'is chin on the 'andle. The point of the knife were on the m yogynig desk. Thinks I: 'It's a good thing as the point of that 'ere knife ain't sharper, or it would cut a scratch on the desk, and oo'd git the blame fer dam'n of the guv'nor's property. Wy, I would.'"

"When did you miss this knife from its usual place on the prisoner's desk?"

"On the Wednesday afternoon, when I were puttin' away Mr. Gray's ledgers. Mr. Vickers were in the room at the time, copying of a reference in the day-book. I told 'im as the knife were gone, and ses 'e: 'All right, James; no doubt Mr. Gray knows where it is. Look smart and put his books away. He's goin' out to a party to-night, and 'e'll be leavin' early. Get the place cleared before 'e comes in.'"

"The prisoner was then out at the accountant's, you say? At what time did he return?"

"About four o'clock. Mr. Kehesten were with 'im and they went away together. I didn't say anythin' more about the knife bein' missin', and Mr. Vickers wen 'e went out a bit arter, 'e told me not to bother myself."

"Did you see Mr. Vickers in the office again that evening?"

"Yes. 'E were kept busy on the Exchange that afternoon, au' when 'e came back 'e ad some letters to write. 'E didn't gi' me the keys till near eight o'clock. Then I carried 'is portmanteal to 'is club, where 'e went to dress for the ball at the governor's—at Mr. Lucas's 'ouse."
This concluded the case for the prosecution, and the Court adjourned. Laurence Gray was then conducted to his cell.

"Well, Jack, how's this affair going to end?" remarked the veteran reporter, gathering up his papers.

"Guilty, of course," said the representative of the Fleet Street Gazette.

"Not a bit of it my boy. I've seen more murder trials than any man in London. I lay Gray's as innocent as you or me. He'll be acquitted."

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK CAP

On the following morning Laurence Gray entered the dock less firmly than he had done on the first day of the trial. The nature of the evidence, so directly against him in its connecting chains of circumstance, had appalled him. His haggard face betrayed the anxiety that he had endured in the seclusion of his cell. He looked round the court, and swiftly brought his eyes to bear upon the seat that Geraldine Lucas had occupied on the previous day. She was there, looking paler and more troubled, but her soft, violet eyes met his own with brave, true love shining in them. A thrill of joy passed through him. She, at least, did not doubt him. In the gladness of this knowledge the fear that had oppressed him passed wholly away.

The leading counsel for the defence opened his case with a few introductory words, and his first witness was called.

This was Laurence Gray's landlady, Mrs. Howarth, a homely, sweet-faced woman of middle age, who, having been sworn, turned to look at Laurence with an expression of motherly pity.

She gave evidence to the effect that the prisoner had occupied rooms in her house in Well Lane, Hampstead, for five years; that he had regularly paid his rent and that he was of very steady habits. On the evening
of Wednesday, February 15th, he had come home, as in the morning he had said he would do, at a few minutes after five o'clock. He used his latch-key in entering, and went straight to his bedroom. Knowing that he was going to Fenton Court that night, she had asked him, as he passed through the hall, if he would have hot water upstairs. He said, "No, thank you, Mrs. Howarth. I'll have a cup of tea presently, and dress afterwards."

"Was there any unsteadiness in his voice when he spoke to you?"

"None whatever."

"Was he in any way excited or nervous—stirred?"

"No, I gave him a letter that had come by post. In taking it his hand was perfectly steady. It was the same afterwards when he was taking his tea."

Geraldine looked gratefully at Mrs. Howarth, but waited anxiously for the next question.

"You swear that he bore no outward signs of having been in a struggle?"

"I do."

"When he had dressed and gone out, did you enter his room?"

"I did. And I saw by the various tokens that he had not been too nervous to shave himself."

"Did you see any blood-marks about the clothes or linen he had taken off?"

"None."

"Now, as to the prisoner's financial condition. Did it, at any time, appear to you that he was in money difficulties?"

"On the contrary, he was, I believe, in receipt of an excellent salary, and that he always had plenty of money was proved to me in many ways."

"Give me an instance, please."

"At the end of last year he started my son in business, lending him the money that he needed."

A juror here asked for the exact date of this transaction and the amount of the sum advanced.

"Mr. Gray gave my son a cheque for two hundred pounds on December 5th."
The jurymen and several of the barristers made a note of this; the defending counsel bit his lips. After some cross examination, the witness was dismissed.

Ralph Vickers was then called. Laurence Gray drew closer to the bars of the dock, trying to meet the witness’s eyes. Geraldine Lucas moved restlessly in her seat, and seemed to await the next piece of evidence with considerable nervousness.

Ralph Vickers was a man of about nine-and-twenty, handsome, beyond a doubt, with a well-trimmed black beard, and large dark eyes of a somewhat languid expression. His nose was of that Grecian type that sculptors give to their antique gods. His well-knit figure was revealed under this tight-fitting overcoat. His hands, as he raised the book to his lips in taking the oath, were long rather than broad.

“You were present,” said the examining counsel, after some introductory questions had been replied to—“you were a guest at Fenton Court on the night of February 15th? At what time did you arrive there?”

“Between nine and ten o’clock.”

“Did you go home to dress after leaving the city on that evening?”

“No; I dressed at my club in Lombard Street.”

“At what time did you leave your office?”

“At about a quarter to eight.”

“At what time did the prisoner leave?”

“As near as possible, four o’clock.”

Counsel hesitated. Ralph Vickers raised his eyes, and slowly turned them towards the clock. At sight of Laurence Gray he grew suddenly nervous. He thrust his trembling hands into his overcoat pockets.

“My God!” he said to himself, “what will the next question be? How shall I answer it?”

A buzzing sound seemed to fill his ears.

“What were your movements during that interval?”

The witness grew visibly paler, but, nevertheless, answered in a steady voice:

“From half-past four to six o’clock I was occupied at the Exchange. At six I returned to the office, and wrote letters until nearly eight.”
This false *alibi* passed unquestioned.

Vickers was then asked to identify the knife. He did not touch it, but simply looked at it hurriedly as it was held near him in the hands of a court official. He swore to its being the knife that Laurence Gray was accustomed to use as a paper-cutter, and stated that he had first noticed its absence from the desk on his attention being drawn to that fact by the office boy.

“You swear that it was not taken up by the prisoner immediately before he left the office?”

“Yes. I observed that it was missing before he came in from calling upon the accountant.”

At the next question Ralph Vickers breathed more freely. The one fatal point that would have made all the difference in the result of the trial was passed over. Had he been cross-questioned as to his own whereabouts between a quarter-past four and six o’clock, the jury would probably have arrived at a very different verdict. But the defending counsel was more eager to prove Laurence Gray innocent than to seek to discover the man who was really guilty.

Questions relating to what took place at Fenton Court elicited evidence that was neither favourable nor unfavourable to the accused man.

As to the manner of the embezzlement, Ralph Vickers was inwardly assured that suspicion was already well fixed upon the rival whom he hated. His own books had, happily for himself, been skilfully enough manipulated. He had, so far, cleverly succeeded in escaping all suspicion, and, knowing that Geraldine Lucas was in court, he adroitly saved himself from her possible displeasure by appearing to defend her accepted but unfortunate lover, while admitting nothing that might either incriminate himself or palliate the apparent guilt of Laurence Gray.

The counsel for the prosecution, in summing up the evidence, contended that a strong motive had been shown for the commission of the crime by the prisoner. It had been shown that the accused had practised for many months a system of embezzlement. To cover his numerous defalcations, and in order that their
discovery might not destroy his chance of winning his master's daughter, he had cooked his accounts. Finding that his false entries could not escape the lynx eye of the deceased—who was admitted to be one of the most expert accountants in the metropolis—he had endeavoured to arrest the discovery of one crime by committing a much darker one.

It had been clearly proved that the fatal weapon was one which was well known to belong to him. He had been seen in the railway carriage alone with his victim, at the station beyond which the murder was committed. He had also been seen leaving the station most immediately contiguous to the scene of the crime. More convincing than all this, a blood-stained fragment of his victim's neckcloth had been found in his overcoat pocket. The evidence which had been adduced pointed to one conclusion only—namely, that the prisoner was the person who had perpetrated the crime.

The counsel for the defence then addressed the jury. He pointed out that what they had to consider was whether the chain of circumstantial evidence in this case was sufficiently strong to justify them in coming to a conclusion adverse to the prisoner. Reviewing the evidence, he said that there were material discrepancies warranting their pausing before returning a verdict of "Guilty." He argued that it had not been clearly proved that the weapon had been taken from the office by the prisoner, no witness had shown that the prisoner had been seen with that weapon in his possession outside of his office on the day in question. The evidence of Angus Macintyre as to the accused travelling beyond Gospel Oak in company with the deceased was purely negative, and negative evidence was not conclusive. He laid great stress upon the prisoner's emphatic assertion before the police superintendent that he had changed carriages at Gospel Oak. Who could say that no other person had entered in his place into the carriage with the deceased? The absence of all signs of the prisoner having engaged in such a physical struggle, as must have been necessary, before the deceased could have been stabbed and his
body been thrown out of the carriage, was strongly in
his favour.

On arrival at his home, within twelve minutes of the
murder, the prisoner was calm, unruffled, steady of
hand. And could they, for a moment, believe that a
man of such gentle and sincere aspect as the prisoner
at the bar could go almost red-handed from such a
deed and offer himself in marriage to the beautiful
woman he loved, the woman whose father—who was
also his own benefactor—he is alleged to have systema-
tically robbed? The assumption was monstrous!

As to the motive for the crime imputed to the prisoner,
was it at all likely that any man would, as hinted by
the prosecution, rob his master of £200, for no selfish
reason, but in order to launch the son of his landlady
in business? The idea was ridiculous.

The correspondence of the date of the last embez-
sement with that of the loan to the landlady’s son was a
mere coincidence. In the second place, was it at all
probable that, having manipulated his accounts, he
would brutally take the life of the accountant, who, as
far as he knew, had not definitely traced the defalcations
to their source? If the prisoner was indeed guilty of
these embezzlements, where was the reason in his first
manipulating his accounts and then murdering the
accountant before those manipulations had stood the
test of the accountant’s scrutiny?

Counsel pointed out to the jury the danger of relying,
in a case like that, upon circumstantial evidence entirely,
and to pause before they came to the decision that the
prisoner’s was the hand which took the murdered man’s
life. If they entertained any doubt as to whether
he was, either by himself, or with others, a party to the
murder, they ought to acquit him.

The judge, having summed up the evidence and
reviewed it in all its details, entreated the jury not
to found their verdict upon speculative theories and
visionary ideas, but to test, and try, and weigh—and
accurately weigh—every particle of the evidence—real,
solid, cogent evidence—before they came to a verdict
antagonistic to this man.
The jury then retired, and were absent for half an hour. In that interval, Geraldine Lucas, her heart beating furiously in its terrible suspense, crept down from her seat, and, almost unobserved by anyone other than Laurence Gray, stood close underneath the dock. She heard the jury return to their seats; she heard the Clerk of Arraigns ask if they had agreed upon their verdict; and then, as though a knife had pierced her heart, she started back with the terrible words ringing in her ears:

"We find him guilty!"

Then, when the judge had asked Laurence Gray the usual question as to whether he had anything to say why sentence should not be passed upon him, she heard the voice of her lover sounding clear and resolute as he held up his hand:

"I am innocent. Before God I declare that I am innocent!"

The judge placed upon his head a little square piece of black velvet, and, with a solemn voice, and amid the awful silence of the court, he said:

"Laurence Gray, you have been found guilty, after a most patient trial, and a most able defence, and I must say that I feel it to be absolutely impossible to conceive that the death of Charles Kesteven would have taken place without your having been an active instrument towards that death. I do not wish to add to the pangs which you must feel by saying much to you, but I cannot hold out to you any hope whatever that within a very short time you will not cease to live as an inmate of this our world. You will have a certain time for preparation. God grant that you may use that time for your eternal welfare. You will be kindly dealt with and kindly ministered to; and I trust you will use your short time upon earth in preparing yourself for another world. The sentence of the Court is that you shall be taken from the place where you now are to the place of your execution, and hanged by the neck until you are dead; and God have mercy on your soul!"

Geraldine Lucas gave a piteous cry, and rapidly stepped towards the bar of the dock, stretching her trembling hands towards her lover, and looking up into
his agonised face. Laurence bent over and caught her hands convulsively.

"Laurence, dear Laurence," she cried, passionately pressing her lips to his fingers, "I do not doubt your innocence. Though all men be against you—though all the world be against you—my heart will be true to you still!"

CHAPTER V

IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Dazed, with a sudden numbness of the brain that in that first hour of horror saved him perhaps from madness, Laurence Gray was conducted back to his cell in Newgate prison. It was not the same cell as that which he had hitherto occupied, but one on a higher storey.

In all other respects it exactly resembled the old one. There were the same white-washed walls, flawlessly clean, the same bright-polished, asphalt floor, the same shelves, small flap-table and solitary wooden stool. Above all, there was the same intense cold. In this bitter winter weather those bare walls and asphalt floor struck a deathly chill even into the hot full veins of youth.

It was the cold that first roused Laurence Gray from the torpor into which he had fallen. Memory awoke in him, and with that awakening came an anguish that made him insensible to all bodily discomforts, fixing his whole soul on one horrible thought; he was a condemned man!

Condemned—doomed to die ignominiously at the gallows for a crime that he had not committed! to perish in his bright youth, in the fulness of his joy, in that supremest time of blessedness when love smiled on him, and the future seemed opening before him in a dazzling glory of golden light!

He groaned aloud in his great agony. Surely no criminal, no red-handed murderer justly cut off from life, had ever lost so much as he, an innocent man, was losing now.
And she, Geraldine, his beloved, whose loyal heart had not been afraid to show its loyalty when all others turned away, what suffering, what reflected dishonour her love for him had brought upon her! She had said she would be true. Great Heavens! true to what? In a little while he would be dead. Would she, dared she, be true to the memory of one branded as a criminal, a man hanged for murder?

His limbs quivered, his brain seemed filled with fire. For a moment he felt that madness was surely coming upon him: and to calm himself, to get relief, he began to pace the narrow cell. To and fro, like a caged animal, he strode, with his hands locked convulsively. His handsome face was distorted in his despair. His eyes were wild, and a cold perspiration beaded his forehead and damped his thick brown hair.

"Geraldine, Geraldine!" he murmured to himself at times. And then again imploringly, as if his beloved could help him, "Geraldine!"

Oh, bitterest of all, bitterer even than coming death was it that she—she for whose sake he would have striven to be the noblest man on earth—should see him thus abased, thus powerless to clear himself from the cloud of shame that had fallen upon him! She believed in his innocence now while her love was strong, while yet the seal of his betrothal kiss lingered upon her lips; but by and by, when he was dead, when his body had the courtyard of the gaol for its infamous sepulchre, would she believe in him then?

A low deep cry broke from him as he paced. He stopped suddenly, sat down on the wooden stool, and, hiding his face in his hands, burst into tearless sobs.

He sat there so for hours. At last the door of his cell opened, and a warden asked if he required anything. Prisoners under sentence of death are not allowed luxurious diet, but a certain laxity is permitted. Laurence replied that he wanted nothing. The warden retired, but presently returned bringing some food, which the prisoner might eat or leave, as he chose. Laurence was then told to make his bed, and given instructions how to do it; after which he was left alone.
for the night. Unknown to him, however, the eye of the warder was frequently upon him through the wire-gauze spy-hole in the door.

He did not go to bed. The whole night through he paced his cell, save when in moments of extreme exhaustion he sank down for a while on the little stool.

In those quiet hours the noises of the street traffic came up to him; gradually the muffled murmur, new duller and duller with advancing lateness, until at last it almost died away. Oh, that murmur of the streets, unheeded by free men, how living, how fierce 'twas to those for whom crime or misfortune had made liberty and right to tread those stones as far away and unattainable as the remotest heat of Africa or the yet undiscovered pole!

The hours of the long, bitterly cold night were marked by the bells of St. Paul's and St. Sepulchre. Painfully, terribly distinct they sounded in Laurence Gray's ears.

Their iron tones rang harshly in the deep stillness, solemn as strokes of doom. Laurence shuddered as he crossed the ice-cold asphalt, or sat half frozen on the stool.

Twice the door of his cell was opened, and the flash of a warder's lantern illumined the darkness. He could not hear whether the warder went away along the gallery, or whether he remained outside the door, for the official on night duty were shippers that were noiseless as the stealthy foot of a cat.

At last the clanging of a great bell proclaimed that it was time to rise. For Laurence no longer was needed since he had not been to bed. Haggard, exhausted, well-nigh insane in his overwhelming despair, he sat with his head buried in his hands, and his limbs numb with the intense cold. Breakfast was served to him, but he took no heed. He wanted neither food nor drink. He was disturbed at last by the entrance of a warder, who peremptorily ordered him to prepare for chapel.

Mindless, feelingless as an automaton, he was marched into the large hall where stands the glass consulting-room that presently—could he have foreseen it—was to be the scene of a new birth of peace in his oppressed heart.

From here he was taken up a dark winding stairway
to the chapel, which was a large room, square and high. It had two large divisions, shut off with iron bars, like immense cages, in one of which were fifteen or sixteen cropped and shaven prisoners who had been tried and sentenced, and were waiting to be drafted off to the various convict prisons at which they were to serve out their sentences. The other barred-off space contained those who were committed for trial, while prisoners who were merely remanded sat on open benches between.

Laurence Gray was conducted by his warder to a chair immediately below the pulpit, the distinctive seat of prisoners waiting death. The warder sat on another chair beside him.

How true, how vivid were the words of prayer resounding in that assemblage of the vicious and the broken-hearted! How vivid above all to the one among them before whose eyes the phantom of approaching death stood menacing and ghastly! They fell like balm on his despairing heart, lifting up his strength, bidding him prove himself worthy of his manhood, worthy of the conscious innocence that should make his steps to the scaffold as fearless and firm as if they had led him to the marriage altar. Geraldine, too, would wish him to be brave. No man who was not brave was worthy of her pure strong love, her noble constancy.

When he left the chapel after service was ended, his natural spirit had revived, and although the shadow was not lifted from him, and his agony of mind was not less keen, yet he walked with his head erect and his features calm, as a man should, who knows that within himself there is no guilt.

An hour or two later he was summoned from his cell to see a visitor who, he was told, had obtained by order the privilege of an interview with him in the glassroom—where he had already held consultations with his solicitor—instead of at the more public grating.

His heart gave a great bound. Could it be Geraldine? It was she, lovely as ever, but white and frail as a lily, with the brown circles of grief and sleeplessness beneath her heavenly eyes. For a moment he swayed
in his walk, overcome by love and shame and joy together. Then he rushed to her, and caught her outstretched hands convulsively.

They stood thus for some moments, looking at each other, but speechless with emotion. Besides, looks were safer there than words, for the door of the glass-room was open, and warders were stationed outside, not only to keep them in sight, but also to hear what they said. Yet words came at last. It was Laurence who spoke first.

"Oh, my darling, my darling! Heaven bless you for coming to me!"

And she, who had been scanning his dear face, noting its pallor and the lines that told of terrible, unspeakable suffering, answered passionately:

"Did you think I should not come? Did you think I believed in you less? Laurence! if an angel came to me and told me you were guilty, I would not believe it."

"Geraldine!" his voice trembled, "if I have in any way deserved this shame and sorrow, it must be by having been too happy. Just to have been loved by you is joy enough for one man's life. It was wrong in me to expect more."

"Ah, but you will have more," she cried eagerly, trying to make herself believe in what she said. "You must be brave, be hopeful."

"I will be brave," Laurence said solemnly, looking down tenderly into her tearful eyes. "I promise you that, my own, my dearest. But I cannot be hopeful. In a very little while now I shall be dead."

She burst into passionate sobs.

"No, no! God will not let it be."

"It will be," he returned quietly. "We cannot tell how it was that circumstances were against me so, but they were against me blackly, and the sentence has gone forth. We cannot fight against the law." And then he took her hands again and bent his face nearer to hers. "Geraldine, tell me, will you love my name, my memory, after I am gone, even though I—oh, Heaven! how shall I say it?—even though I
have died a criminal's death? Other people will not believe me innocent. They will say I have disgraced you, have wilfully mixed up your spotless name with the blackness of my guilt. Will you be able to hear all that, and not wish that you had never seen me?"

With an effort she calmed herself sufficiently to speak. Her eyes, dimmed now, looked up with all her heart shining through them.

"Laurence," she said gravely, "if I could I would walk by your side as you go to the scaffold, and there, before all those present, I would say, 'I love him,' and I would say it with pride. But you will not die; you shall not! Something will happen; the true criminal will be discovered. Whoever he is, he will confess; he will not let an innocent man die."

"It is too late," Laurence answered gently, shaking his head. "If he had meant to confess, he would have done so before now. No, Geraldine, this is the last time."

He felt her hand trembling in his. Her eyes had a wild look of anguish.

"Geraldine," he murmured, "I was a coward last night; I gave way weakly, like a child. But I have done with cowardice now; for your sake I am going to be brave; and, darling, you must be brave for mine. Hereafter, in the other world, I shall have no shame. I shall be with the innocent, and you will come to me."

She gave a low moan, as of bodily pain. It was time for them to part. A warder came to conduct the condemned prisoner away.

"Laurence! Laurence!" cried the heart-broken girl, clasping his arm so that he might not go.

He gently freed himself from her hold. He put her from him and looked at her—for the last time—in her exquisite, flower-like beauty, that was sweetened, not spoiled, by grief. And, as he looked, he nerved himself for the final wrench—the awful sacrifice of her and of his joy.

"Good-bye, my beloved one," he faltered. "God bless you all through your life."

And then he suffered himself to be led from the room. But at the door he turned and looked back.
“It is this that is death,” he muttered, as he staggered away. “Not the killing of the body that is to come by and by. This—this is the worst. From this moment I have died!”

CHAPTER VI

THE NEWSPAPER

Whatever Geraldine Lucas thought concerning the terrible sentence pronounced upon the man she so deeply loved, there was one by whom the result of that trial was received with intense satisfaction.

Ralph Vickers made an outward show of commiserating Laurence Gray, but consistently maintained that the verdict was the only possible one.

Poor Gray, he said, had been tempted to take a few pounds of his governor’s cash—who could say what little expenses a young man might not have suddenly to meet? He had known all along that Gray was pinched for money, though it was no business of his to expose his own manager.

Gray had squared his accounts 'cutely'; but he was a simpleton to suppose that Kesteven would fail to discover the defalcations. Guilty? Why, of course he was guilty. Who could question it? As to that knife, that was where Gray had tripped. He might have known that the weapon would be identified.

But there you are, you see; the man was no doubt impelled to take the first weapon at hand, and so he left a loophole, as so many criminals do.

“I always thought,” added Vickers, “that Gray was a villain at heart. Anyway, he’ll get his just punishment now, and Miss Lucas will be spared the disgrace of marrying a criminal.”

These were Ralph Vickers’ arguments. But in his breast he nursed a gloating satisfaction that the jury had been so blinded by the evidence of circumstance. The evidence of the motive, of the journey in the train, of the weapon—every coincidence had been convincing and conclusive.
Laurence Gray was to be hanged! He would have no chance now of defending himself or setting the law upon the trail of the real assassin. The arm of justice was sure and prompt, and dead men could tell no tales.

That last phrase echoed as a familiar harmony in Ralph Vickers's brain, repeating and asserting itself hour by hour. Dead men tell no tales! Dead men tell no tales! It had first formed itself in his mind in connection with Charles Kesteven, at the time when that sharp-eyed accountant had first discovered the doubtful entries in the books of Christopher Lucas and Co.

It had rung in his brain at the ball at Fenton Court, attuning itself to the regular swing of the waltz music, on that foggy night in February, when Ralph Vickers, alone among men, knew that Charles Kesteven lay dead upon the railway embankment, with Laurence Gray's knife sticking in his breast.

The phrase repeated itself again with quickened meaning when the solemn words of the judge declared the awful doom of an innocent man. The few short days that were to elapse between that sentence and its fulfilment would soon pass by, and then—dead men tell no tales!

Thus Ralph Vickers comforted himself. His nerves were steadier now than they had been previous to the terrible ordeal of his own brief examination in court. None who heard his straightforward evidence could possibly have dreamt of the awful fears that were as red-hot brands of steel about his brow—fears that by the dropping of one incautious word, his own guilt might be discovered, and Laurence Gray set free. The ordeal was over now; he breathed more freely. But not until the scaffold had claimed its victim would the danger of discovery be entirely passed.

Vickers carefully read the press reports of the trial. Especially did he study the comments upon the case in the leading articles. But here there was nothing to cause him uneasiness.

About a fortnight after the delivery of the verdict, however, the office-boy, James Stinchcombe, came into the room where Vickers was writing.
"Yere'd a bit o' noos as'll interest yer, Mr. Vickers," said the lad. "It's all abart Mr. Gray."

And he pulled out from his trouser's pocket three tightly folded journals, two of them illustrated and very much pocket-worn. The third was an evening edition of the Fleet Street Gazette.

"Nooso? Mr. Gray?" echoed Vickers, with a sardonic smile. "What has Mr. Gray got to do with a noose? His time for that will come on Monday morning."

"Oo're yer gettin' at, sir?" said James. "I didn't say noose, I said noos. Just you read wot it says in this yer piper, sir. I've bin a-readin' of it."

"You are not supposed to read newspapers when you're sent on a message, James," said Vickers reprovingly. "Go into the outer office and copy the letters I've put on your desk—the type-written ones."

"Right, sir," said James, returning the still unopened Gazette to his side-pocket.

"No, you can leave the paper here, James. I'll just glance at it presently," said Vickers carelessly.

"Wot, in the guv'nor's time, sir?" returned the lad, winking knowingly. "Well, that ain't arf bad, that ain't."

The office-boy had not closed the door a moment, when Ralph Vickers grabbed at the paper James had left on his desk, and nervously opened it. His eyes fell upon a front page leaferette, headed "A Legal Murder"; they caught sight of the name of Laurence Gray. He spread out the paper nervously and began to read.

"We are progressing," the article began. "After legal robbery comes the consummation of the act of legal murder by the execution of Laurence Gray. The unfortunate prisoner, now lying under the death sentence in Newgate, will be hanged on Monday. This is convenient for the prosecution, for the ghosts of the legally murdered never haunt the corridors of the Home Office."

Vickers looked round to assure himself that he was alone. He continued to read:

"The Home Secretary, we are told this morning, is still deliberating upon the case. We are glad to hear it. But so far he has omitted to do one thing,
and that is to hear full evidence on Gray's side. Laurence Gray has not been heard, nor has Laurence Gray's lawyer. We are assured by the prisoner's solicitor that the judge, whose summing-up sent the accused man to the gallows, is himself no longer convinced that the evidence of his guilt is so strong as it appeared to him at the Old Bailey. The opposing hypothesis was not adequately presented by the counsel for the defence.

"It is terrible to think of the possibility of that hypothesis being correct. Life is a sacred thing, and the Home Secretary might well shudder at the thought of sending to the gallows one who is not only innocent, but who is probably the only witness by whom the crime may yet be brought home to the actual murderer."

Ralph Vickers drew a deep gasping breath. He scarcely dared to read farther.

"The sand in the glass is rapidly running out. But there is yet time for the Prime Minister to insist upon a respite for at least another week to give opportunity of fully and completely sifting the evidence.

"Let the Home Secretary listen to the story of the condemned man himself. Let him cautiously follow the evidence concerning the abstraction of the fatal weapon from the office of Mr. Christopher Lucas. Let him discover where and by whom that knife was sharpened for its bloody work.

"Let him assure himself that at Gospel Oak station, on the night of the murder, no person or persons other than the condemned man entered the compartment in which Charles Kesteven met his death. Above all, let the Home Secretary investigate the supposed motive of the crime, and determine whether the defalcations discovered by the deceased accountant were the defalcations of Laurence Gray, and of Laurence Gray alone."

[Vickers, seeing how closely the conjectures of the newspaper writer approached the actual truth, clenched his long hands in impotent misgiving and wrath. What business had these journalists to meddle with the affair, to stir up doubts, to incite people to further search?

The trial was over, the sentence pronounced; why couldn't they hold their peace and let the law take its
course! Why couldn't they forget that hated man—at this point Vickers ground his teeth—who was waiting for his end far enough out of their sight?

Then slowly his anger passed into terror. What if this agitation should bring about a reprieve?

The thought appalled him. He grew deadly pale, and ran his fingers nervously through his black hair. If Gray should remain alive, his own secret guilt might at any time be revealed to the world. He started and gazed at the door, as if even at that moment he dreaded lest some emissary of the law should enter the office where he sat and should demand his secret.

CHAPTER VII

A MESSAGE OF LIFE

It was on the forenoon of a Sunday that the welcome news reached Laurence Gray. On the previous night he had faintly heard from a distance the first preparation of the carpenters in the shed when the awful scaffold was to be erected. Trouble though the sound was it did not lessen his courage. Already his heart's life was over. Why, then, should he dread the mere passing of life from the body?

His feelings as he sat in the chapel on the Sunday morning were those of brave resignation. The short address of the prison chaplain brought him a crowning comfort and peace. Never had he prayed more fervently; never had divine service wherever he had joined in it appealed to him with more sacred meaning than on this day that he believed would be his last on earth.

Calm still, he returned to his cell. But scarcely had he entered when the door was flung open, and the governor of the prison came in, followed by the chaplain. They came to inform him that he was not to die.

He heard them blankly at first, doubting still. When at last the glad truth dawned on his brain, he gave a cry of thanksgiving. The shadows that had closed about him vanished, and in their place a rush of glorious light flooded his soul. Life was his again, life made a
thousand times dearer by the near risk of its loss. For a few moments he imagined that he was to be restored to liberty also. But soon he realised that the commutation of his sentence still meant that he was to spend the rest of his young days as a miserable convict in penal servitude. For twenty years—he felt that clemency might come then—for twenty long and bitter years he was to be a prisoner, exiled from the world he loved so well; with no other associates than brutal criminals and harsh prison officials; with no other home than the bare white walls of his cell. Oh, how could he live through all that weary time? He would be almost an old man in twenty years.

And Geraldine—would she wait for him? Would she be true to him all that time? Ah no, he dared not think of her in that way now. Before, when the sombre shadow of death hung over him, he yet had hoped to meet her again in the bright world beyond the grave.

But in twenty years? What would he be then? A degraded man, with the marks of his torments on him, depraved and sullied, perhaps, by intimate association with criminals whose imprisonment was the just punishment for the evil work they had done—men who were in many cases little above the beasts.

Not long did Laurence Gray receive the temporary leniency that is accorded a condemned man. On the following morning—the Monday morning—he was taken from his cell, and marched with other convicts to the prison bath. There, in the presence of warders and prisoners, he was ordered to strip and wash himself in a large tank of not over-clean water. His own clothes of freedom were then forfeited, and in their place he was supplied with a coarse, blue-striped shirt, a rough grey short jacket, trousers, and vest, and a greasy little cap, a pair of darned stockings, and thick shoes.

He thanked God that Geraldine could not see him in that hideous guise. But later on he was submitted to a yet more degrading process. An evil-looking prison orderly came into his cell, and at once proceeded to shave off the little moustache, which Laurence had held sacred. Then his brown curls were clipped and clipped with a
pair of clumsy shears, until there was not a hair upon
his head that his fingers could take hold of.

Thus shorn and clothed as a convict, he felt his
degradation complete. But there was more to follow.
Every morning he was obliged to go down on his knees
in his cell, and with two hard brushes, polish the asphalt
floor. Already it so shone that he could almost see his
face in it.

Then his copper wash-basin and tin utensils, his table,
stool, and, indeed, every article in the cell, had also to
be scoured or polished by him. Spotless cleanliness
is one of the prime regulations of Her Majesty’s prisons.

After breakfast of gruel and bread, some pieces of
hard tar rope were thrown in to him, together with an
instrument called by prisoners a “fiddle,” consisting
of a nail and a piece of cord. With the aid of this in-
strument, he was required to divide the strands of the
tar rope, and with his fingers reduce them to what is
everywhere known as oakum.

Four pounds of oakum is the quantity demanded of
each healthy prisoner as a day’s work. But it was not
for many days that Laurence succeeded in his task.
The rope was hard as wood, and his fingers, since the
old working days in the Lancashire factory, had become
soft and unaccustomed to labour.

In that cold and comfortless cell, and with his mind
still terribly oppressed, his first days of durance passed
like long weeks. Already he was beginning to feel
the awful monotony of prison life—the work, the exer-
cise in the high-walled yard, the morning visits of the
governor, the fussy officialism, the food, never varied.

As to the food itself, Laurence ate little of it. It
was not appetising. For breakfast, the nauseous
skilly and dry bread; for dinner a few soapy potatoes,
and two or three ounces of ill-cooked meat, or soup made
of the liquor the meat had been boiled in the day before;
for supper, cocoa and bread. This was the unvarying fare.

Laurence Gray was among the first of the prisoners
that session to be drafted off to a convict station.
Handcuffed, he was conducted to the dismal prison
van; pushed into a narrow compartment, and there
locked in. The Black Maria was driven off through the noisy streets of London, he knew not whither.

His neighbours on either side of him kept up a lively conversation throughout the journey. They were evidently old birds.

"Wot cher, Darkie?" began one.

"'Ello, Nipper, yer there, eh? Where are we barning for this journey—the Scrubs?"

"Ay, I reckon that's the crib. 'Tain't such a dusty place. I'd sooner be in there than the Bank any day. Young Lacy's one o' the screws at the Scrubs, don't yer know? 'Im as were at Wandsworth last time me and you done a laggin' together. Wot's yer lot this time, mate?"

"Two years 'ard."

"Oh, that'll soon parse. Mine's five stretches. But the cove wot's between us, 'e's a lifer, ain't 'e?"

"Ay; it's 'im as done that little job at Gospel Oak?"

Laurence did not understand the prison slang those men used, but he gathered that the destination was Wormwood Scrubs Prison, and so it proved to be.

On entering the prison gates he was relieved of his handcuffs. Documents giving full particulars of his name, weight, measurements, case, and sentence, were examined and verified. After the customary bath, he was furnished with other clothes of a yet more distinctly convict type than those worn at Newgate, and a circular badge that was sewn upon his left sleeve bore the letter "L," signifying that he was a life convict, and also the letter "R," indicating the year, and the number "99," by which distinctive number he was afterwards to be known, his name being sunk.

During the probationary imprisonment at Wormwood Scrubs he was kept in solitary confinement. His cell, however, was provided with a wooden floor. His occupation was the monotonous one of picking oakum. But saving this, his hardships were not more severe than he expected. The prison was a new one, and its governor and warders were inclined to leniency.

The food, though it differed a little from that of Newgate, was yet not unwholesome. Had the whole term of his penal servitude been as free from painful
discomfort, the misery of his own mind would have been his greatest trouble.

But Laurence Gray little dreamt of the terrible anguish, the torture, the degradation, that were in store for him in other and more distant scenes, to which he was soon to be removed.

On a certain rainy night Ralph Vickers took up his post, waiting, anxiously watching at one of the platforms of the Great Western Railway terminus. In the mail train near which he stood, smoking a cigar, there was a large third-class carriage that had evidently been specially reserved.

At last the expected vehicle arrived—a prison van. Vickers went towards it, keeping in the shadow. A prison warder sprang from his seat at the back, and was joined by several other officials in uniform similar to his own, and armed with swords and loaded revolvers.

One by one twelve men alighted. Their chains rattled as they stepped upon the pavement. They were all in prison garb—short loose jackets, baggy knickerbockers of drab tweed with wide black stripes, blue woollen stockings ringed with red, grey, and red worsted caps. Each convict wore handcuffs, and a long running chain connected him with his neighbour by a loop through the left handcuff.

They crossed the platform, guarded by their warders, and stood by the carriage reserved for them in the train. Some of the twelve laughed and joked as they begged tobacco from the crowd who watched them. But the last man of the gang walked with his handsome head erect, and with his eyes fixed steadily before him. There was a look of hard determination in his haggard shaven face, as he stood in the light of one of the gas-lamps.

Ralph Vickers had little difficulty in recognising him. Despite the cropped hair, the shaven lip, the convict dress, Laurence Gray was yet as a prince among those low-browed, crime-stained men. Vickers, still keeping in the shadows, looked searchingly at the badge on Gray’s left arm. He drew nearer.

“L. R. Ninety-nine,” he murmured half aloud.

But at the sound of that voice Laurence looked round.
At the sudden recognition, Vickers sprang forward with open hands outstretched, as in true friendship and sympathy.

"Gray," he said, "be brave. She sent me here. She sent me here to tell you that—"

But one of the warders brushed him roughly aside and hurried the men into the carriage. Vickers drew back and disappeared among the crowd.

"At last I have discovered him," he muttered between his teeth. "Convict 99, Grimley Prison. Good. I shall not forget. My way is clear."

And with another look at the man he had wronged, the man who was now bearing the burden of his guilt, Ralph Vickers sauntered quietly away, meditating yet another crime.

CHAPTER VII

A PENAL SETTLEMENT

"She sent me here," Vickers had said; "she sent me to tell you that—"

That what? Oh, what had been the purport of those unspoken words? Oh, cruel, taunting fate that had caused them to be left unheard, unknown! She, Geraldine, had sent Ralph Vickers to deliver some kindly message that might give her imprisoned lover hope and comfort in his abject misery. Little did the officious warder, who so roughly pushed Vickers aside, dream of the tempest of anguish and disappointment that now raged in the prisoner's breast. What would Laurence not have given—what increase of bodily suffering would he not have willingly endured if he could but have heard the message to its end?

"Be brave, Gray; she sent me here." That was all Laurence had heard. But even these few words made his dead heart leap with a strong, new vigour as he repeated them. They gave him solace for many a long and torturing hour.

When, with his fellow-convicts, he had stepped from the prison van and entered the railway station, he
had been overwhelmed by a sense of the terrible possibility of being observed by someone who had known him in the free world—ashamed to be seen there in that public place, with his hands fettered by the horrible chains of slavery, and wearing that hideous prison garb bearing the unsightly marks of the broad arrow. He had hoped that the darkness would shield him from recognition. But he had been recognised; Ralph Vickers had seen him. It was comforting, nevertheless, to know that Vickers was a friend—a true friend, who did not despise him or mock at him in his shame, but who had stretched forth his hands in sympathy.

Ah, Laurence Gray, you did not know that those seeming friendly hands had done the very deed whose bitter punishment you were now bearing! that it was they that had thrust you into the ranks of the outcast! You did not know that the very reason of Vickers coming thus to behold you was only that he might have it in his power to push you down yet deeper into the abyss of misery. Neither did you dream that the words which gave you comfort were no words of Geraldine Lucas, but only the utterance of a false and cunning schemer, who made them the excuse of approaching you, that he might see the number on your convict's badge, and thereby know better how to mark you out for tyranny and cruelty, such as only the worst of your desperate companions would have to endure.

During that long night journey Laurence, buoyed up by the thought of that message, wondering, too, how Geraldine had contrived to learn that he was to be changing from one prison to another on that particular night, rested his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes. The rattling of the railway carriages was an agreeable contrast to the terrible silence of the cell he had left. He could not sleep. The steel of his handcuffs rasped his wrists at every movement of the chain, and his companions, despite the interference of the warders, took advantage of their temporary freedom from strict discipline, and kept up a coarse conversation that made him wish he could close his ears as well as his eyes.
The train had not long started when one of the warders, sniffing the air suspiciously, flashed his lantern-light on Laurence.

"Ninety-nine," he growled, "you've got some tobacco there. I can smell it. Out with it. I saw that swell give it you on the platform. Come, out with it."

"You mistake, sir. I have no tobacco," said Laurence. "Open your mouth, you liar."

Laurence obeyed. With a long pencil the warder probed under his tongue and about the inside of his cheeks, but finding that the teeth and breath were above suspicion he passed to the next convict, a youth of about nineteen, and one of the noisiest of the gang.

Short as had been their time upon the railway platform, this youth had managed to get hold of some tobacco from one of the onlookers. Not being able to smoke it, he had stuffed it into his mouth and was now chowing it. Fearing discovery, he had been swallowing the juice. Long abstinence had probably lessened his power of resisting the chemical properties of nicotine. There was no need for the warder to search him. His pale face betrayed him.

Laurence did not seek to enter into conversation. He had already learned that there is little to be gained from intercourse with the criminal class.

In the exercise yard at Wormwood Scrubs, where talking, though forbidden, was surreptitiously indulged in, he had attempted to relieve his oppressed mind by listening to the woes of others.

He was not one of those who haughtily look down upon men of a lower social grade than their own. His early association with the working-men of the Lancashire factories had taught him that honest hearts and pure and noble lives are not matters of caste distinction.

But he soon discovered that a convict prison is not the place where intellectual or high-minded conversation may be expected. Among his companions there were, indeed, some who had held enviable social positions, and who, if their crimes had been undiscovered and unpunished, would probably have scorned to hold discourse with a Blackburn weaver.
A PENAL SETTLEMENT

But a convict prison levels all social distinctions, and the wealthy banker who has committed a felony, or the clergyman who has fraudulently appropriated the funds of charity, finds himself no better treated and no more respected than the rough who has half-murdered his wife, or the burglar who has robbed a duchess of her diamonds. All are criminals.

The large number of those who were with him in the train happened, as Laurence gathered, to be criminals of the baser sort. The youth beside him had attempted to cut his sweetheart’s throat; two of those opposite were seamen who had headed a mutiny; another was an Italian, of Saffron Hill, who had stabbed a policeman; and a fourth was a low-browed burglar, on whose face were written the traces of his manifold crimes.

Daybreak enabled Laurence to turn his attention to the passing country.

How grateful to him was the sight of the green fields and the white-walled cottages with the rosy light of the rising sun upon them. Not again would his eyes rest upon such peaceful scenes. He soon was leaving the outer world, it might be for ever; for who could tell if he would survive the long years of his servitude, even if by good conduct he earned the remission of a portion of the dreadful term? As the train entered the more hilly country, he looked anxiously out for the signs which should tell him that they were nearing their destination.

At last the station nearest to Grimley was reached. Here the arrival of a gang of convicts excited no great interest. Two prison vans waited outside. In these the fettered men were conveyed several miles beyond the town. The labour of the horses indicated that the roads were steep. At length the prisoners were ordered to alight and travel on foot.

The first thing that impressed Laurence was the clear fresh air that blew upon his face, carrying without the faint, sweet, nutty odour of gorse-blossom.

He heard a lark singing in the blue sky; from a neighbouring copse a cuckoo called. Around and about on every side stretched a wide undulating moor, that
rose into high hills towards the north. Here and there
the gorse shone in the sunlight like a meadow of gold,
and through the lower valley a wide river gleamed.

It was all like a beautiful dream. But the clanking
of the chain at his wrist, the voices of the officers, and
the sight of his companions, brought him rudely back
to hideous reality.

On the summit of a high hill in the blue distance stood
the gloomy walls of his future home. Laurence could
only vaguely conjecture what this wild wilderness would
be like in a winter storm.

He had a further presentiment of coming hardship
when, on a closer approach to the prison, he saw the
pickets of the civil guard—soldiers most of them, and
all armed with rifles and bayonets—forming a cordon
round the prison, and its outdoor gangs of convicts.
Here he saw a party of bogmen engaged in turf-cutting,
there another gang digging trenches, and yet others
employed in some agricultural work.

The large number of warders in their midst indicated
how careful a watch was kept. He looked about for
the stone-quarries he had heard of in the train, but
they were on the further reaches of the hill.

Presently they passed through a sort of village of
neat cottages—the dwellings of the officials and their
families—with a few small shops and a public-house.
Then came the ponderous gateway of the prison itself,
of heavy granite, set in the high wall surrounding the
buildings of the penal settlement. At one side of the
gate was the governor's residence, at the other that of
his deputy.

The new arrivals were marched into the receiving-ward,
where their shackles were removed. They were then
taken by two warders down a glass-roofed passage to
the bathing-house. Here there were some thirty stone
baths divided off with boards. Ten minutes were allowed
for undressing, bathing, and dressing again. The warders
paraded the length of the baths to prohibit all talking, and
to watch that the men made themselves properly clean.

After the bathing, they returned to the outer passage,
where dinner was served—mutton soup, with potatoes
and vegetables. Still remaining in the passage, they were told to take off their shoes and stockings, jackets, vest, and knickerbockers, and to place them in a row, each man’s suit apart.

This done, they were marched into an office, where sat the deputy governor, the chief warden, and the doctor. The twelve new prisoners were then ordered to strip naked, that all marks on their bodies might be recorded and checked by the reports forwarded by the authorities of Wormwood Scrubs Prison.

Chafing at this indignity, Laurence Gray nevertheless quietly submitted to the medical examination, as he had submitted to all other prison rules.

When he had passed the survey of the doctor, and been pronounced in perfect health, he was directed to take clean underclothing from a bundle near the window. In the meantime, his outer clothing had been carefully searched. Even a crooked pin that he had picked up in the railway carriage, had been taken out of his jacket.

Having dressed again, he was provided with an extra pair of heavy boots, and a suit of coarse working clothes, including a slop jacket of blue-and-red striped canvas, such as he had seen worn by some of the gangs outside the prison. He judged by this that he was to be an outdoor worker.

When, a little later, his hair having been cropped, he was being taken with his companions out of the receiving-ward, he heard the measured tramp of many feet. The outdoor gangs were returning from work, for it was Saturday afternoon, when prisoners are occupied within the cells, cleaning up for Sunday.

Each gang marched past in military order, double file, attended by its officers, who, as they passed the gate, reported to the chief warden the number of men under their charge. These numbers were verified by the entries of the morning. Every officer as he came in delivered to the armourers his rifle, bayonet, belt, and cartridge-box. The gangs numbered in all some four hundred men. They were followed by the civil guard, who marched in with fixed bayonets.

When the gates were closed, Laurence and his fellow
were conducted to their respective cells in various galleries of the building.

Left alone in his cell Laurence stood still, while the slamming of the heavy iron door echoed repeatedly in his heart. A sense of utterable loneliness overcame him. His misery was increased by the deep gloom of his cell—a gloom which, in the parts farthest from the little window, amounted almost to darkness. A long time passed before his eyes grew sufficiently accustomed to this obscurity to enable him to take a survey of his surroundings.

The apartment was seven feet long, four feet broad, and about eight feet high. The walls were of corrugated iron, the floor was of thick slate slabs. The window, a very narrow one of coarse plate-glass, looked inward near the heavy door. Under this window was a small flap-table, and at this spot only was there enough light to read by.

A shelf was erected above the door, where the convict’s spare boots and cleaning rags were to be kept. There was another wider shelf at the inner end, a few feet above the floor. Here was his bedding, rolled up in a neat compact bundle, together with a tin plate, a candle-stick, a tin pint cup, a tin knife, a wooden spoon, a wooden salt-cellar, and an ordinary school slate and pencil.

Under this shelf was his hammock, strapped against the wall. In the middle of the floor stood a low wooden stool and a wooden bucket, and in one of the corners were a hand-broom and a scrubbing-brush, with a flannel and a piece of soap.

While he was making this mental inventory one of the warders ran along the gallery into which the cells opened, taking the roll. This was done by counting not the men but their brooms, which were thrust out under the gap of the doorway of each cell. Laurence was roughly bidden to thrust his broom out also.

For the rest of that afternoon he was engaged in cleaning his utensils. His warder supplied him with clean sheets, new soap, salt, and a candle, instructed him where he was to keep each article, and also how his hammock was to be slung.

This warder’s name was Gannaway. He was power-
fully built and soldierly-looking, with a florid complexion and small keen eyes. He looked at Laurence searchingly as if trying to discover what sort of a man his new charge might be.

"When you hear 'Beds down' called out," he said, "you must fix your hammock so; but not before then, mind you."

"What work am I to be put to, sir?" Laurence ventured to ask.

"What do you say? What's your 'graft' to be? Wait till Monday and you'll see. You needn't expect to be playing billiards and lawn-tennis here, my lord. You're one of them gentlemen lags, I can see. We've got no 'graft' for swells here. H'm, strikes me you want a new strap to this hammock. The lag that was here before you was one of the right sort. He was no gent, he wasn't."

Laurence watched the man go out. His first impression of him was not such as Warder Gannaway would have been proud of.

On Sunday the getting-up bell did not ring until seven o'clock. After breakfast—cocoa and bread—there was an hour's exercise in the halls. Laurence was approached by one or two of the long-sentence convicts, who asked him furtively for news of the outer world. Newspapers were never allowed within the prison walls, and new arrivals are the only means by which intelligence of a public nature can ever by any covert chance reach a prisoner.

After exercise, church parade. After church, the usual Sunday's dinner of bread and cheese was served. From afternoon service until bedtime a prisoner of good conduct may have a book to read.

Laurence Gray thanked Heaven for this privilege. The blessed printed words took his mind for a while from the canker ing grief and bitter humiliation that were driving him to melancholy.

There was another privilege for which he daily waited and prayed—the permission to write to his beloved. Every time a convict is removed from one prison to another he is allowed to write a letter within one month of the change. His relatives receive no other intimation
of his removal, and if the prisoner has lost his class, or
is ill-behaved, the privilege of writing is denied him.

How passionately Laurence longed for the hour in
which he might pen that first sad letter! It was not
long as yet since Geraldine had heard of him; not many
weeks had passed since his cutting-off from the bright
living world of freedom and light and love.

Indeed, according to ordinary prison laws, he should
now have been passing his nine months' probation of
silence and solitary confinement in Wormwood Scrubs.

But the crowding of that prison, owing to the recent
closing of Millbank, had necessitated a premature
drafting of several gangs of convicts to the country penal
settlements, and he had been among those chosen to go.

All day now he dreamed of what he should say in
that letter to Geraldine. The true, strong, heart-wrung
words he should put in it made themselves into a tune
in his head, a sweet tune to which his labouring arms
kept time. He worked desperately hard in order
to win commendation, and thereby bring the yearned-for
time of writing nearer. For the same reason he forced
himself to bear patiently and silently the keenest
indignities, the most stinging humiliations, the
erriest abuse. To send that letter one day sooner
to his beloved one he would have suffered torture.

At last came the prayed-for time. On one evening in
each week there is school for such of the convicts as cannot
read or write properly, or who have not mastered arith-
metic. Laurence, being well educated, did not need instruc-
tion, and might employ the school hour in reading or doing
nothing. On the second school evening after his arrival
at Grimley, he was allowed to write his letter "home."

Poor orphan fellow! he had no home, except where
Geraldine was. But the prison chaplain's words, that
he might write "home," set him thinking of the Lan-
cashire days, and the little house in Blackburn, that
had been his home when he was a child.

He covered his face with his hands at the thought of
what his dear, dead mother would have felt could she
have known that he was there—a wrongfully-branded man,
a convict, thrust in among the blood-stained and the evil.
Desperately he drew towards him the pen, ink, and paper, with which he had been supplied. Orphaned, alone in the world as he was, he felt that if Geraldine's love had forsaken him, he should surely have gone mad.

It was but a poor ghost of a letter that he could write. The paper was regulation paper, on which was already written his name, his register number, and the date. There were lines of printed directions as to rules he was not to infringe. He was to keep his writing on the lines, and neither write between them nor cross his letter.

He was not to say anything about any other prisoner, or give any prison news; neither was he to use any improper language, nor write to any improper person.

Both the governor and the chaplain read and initial the prisoners' letters, those received as well as those sent. Anything infringing the rules, or considered improper for a prisoner to know or make known, is struck out.

There was a notice on the back of Laurence's sheet of paper, informing the recipient that a reply was to be limited to strictly private and personal matters. Any allusion to public affairs—any item of general news—would be obliterated, or the letter containing it would be returned.

Thus trammelled by regulations, Laurence wrote his letter. There was much that he could not say—heart-cries of love that he had to repress because other eyes than Geraldine's would read them.

But every word that was written was deep with meaning, glowed with a whole life's earnestness. And when the letter was done and sent away, a new hope rose in him, and, for the first time since his condemnation, the sleep that came to him that night was sleep indeed—restful, and long, and deep.

CHAPTER IX

THE MASK OF FRIENDSHIP

On a certain evening when, as he well knew, Mr. Christopher Lucas would be away from home, Ralph Vickers called at Fenton Court and asked to see Geraldine.
As he was by no means sure that under ordinary circumstances she would consent to receive him, he told the footman to say that he had called on very important business. He was shown into the drawing room to wait for her.

He sat down on a divan and looked about the familiar room with ever fresh appreciation of its luxury and beauty. Certainly, after the dark foggy streets, it was like fairyland; the soft tones of the rich carpet, the delicate silk of the hangings, the terra-cotta brocade of the couches and divans, the tall palms rising in shady corners, and over all the tender glow of the stately sentinel lamps—all combined to form a harmonious picture that pleased his artistic sense.

For the evil-natured Ralph Vickers had as keen a love of beauty in outward things as had Laurence Gray himself.

Even now, as his satisfied eye dwelt on the scene about him, the thought flashed across his mind that not the least among his hated victim's sufferings must be the contrast between the luxury he had left and the bare and ludicrous surroundings of the hell upon earth where, sunk deep amid the seething infamy of vilest criminals, he dragged out his innocent days.

Ralph Vickers smiled complacently at the comparison. As he smiled he said to himself with cruel satisfaction that most likely—indeed, certainly, if he could have any hand in the matter—Laurence Gray would not live long to suffer from these altered conditions. For though the law did not now will his death, yet his merciless enemy did. And Ralph Vickers's enmity was more to be dreaded than the law.

Scarcely had that evil smile died from Vickers's lips, when the door of the room opened and Geraldine Lucas entered slowly. There was a cold dignity in her step and bearing, showing plainly that she was not glad to greet this man whom from the very first she had instinctively distrusted. She advanced towards him with the stateliness of a young queen, bowed coldly as if she had not seen his proffered hand, and, seating herself, waited for him to state the "very important business" that alone had induced her to grant him an interview.
Her haughty coldness only fanned the flame of his passion for her. He thought such a manner suited her beauty well—her wonderful beauty that to-night was enhanced by the delicate tint of her dress, a faint, tender green as of the lilac leaf, into whose silken fabric scattered sprays of rosy-shaded apple-blossom were exquisitely woven. Above these hues her fair head shone with an added lustre, and her pure skin seemed white as the petals of a lily.

The sight of her loveliness made Ralph Vickers's hatred for his rival yet more bitter. He would have liked to tell her at once of his love for her, and ask her passionately how she could allow herself to think any more of Laurence Gray—a convict whom the gallows had reluctantly spared. But he dared not do this yet. He must wait. He must dissimulate.

"I have come," he said in a sympathetic voice, "to speak of one who is dear to both of us—to me as a friend, to you in an infinitely greater degree. You know whom I mean?"

"Laurence Gray?"

"Yes."

"I prefer that you should not speak of him." she said quickly, overborne by her dislike of the man before her.

Then she caught her breath suddenly. Could it be that this man really knew anything concerning Laurence that was worth her hearing? If so, she must not let personal prejudice prevent him from speaking it.

Meanwhile Vickers's handsome face had assumed a painted expression. He leaned towards her, his fascinating eyes full of appealing softness.

"Why do you doubt me, Miss Lucas? No, don't deny it. I can read in your face that you doubt me, I can hear it in your voice. You wrong me very cruelly, when my only wish is to sympathise with you and help you."

Geraldine rose, partly to hide her embarrassment, and slowly crossed the room to the hearth, where she stood looking at the burning logs.

"Won't you believe in my sincerity and trust me?" proceeded Vickers insinuatingly.

The beautiful girl, influenced by his voice, and
desperately in need of a friend, turned suddenly and held out her hand.

"Yes," she said impetuously, "I will trust you absolutely. And now say what you are going to say about Laurence."

She little dreamed what anguish that newly-given trust would cost her lover.

Ralph Vickers saw how the mention of Gray’s name sent a sudden flush to warm the whiteness of her cheeks, and a hot jealous anger sprang up in him. Nevertheless, his voice was quite calm as he rejoined:

"I believe as firmly as you do that Gray is innocent. I have never once doubted it, in spite of the facts looking so dark against him. I believe his innocence will be proved before long, by some means or other; but, meanwhile, I think that those who care for him should do their best to lessen the hardships of his lot. For this means I place myself at your disposal. I will do anything for him—both for his sake and for yours."

Geraldine moved towards him, her eyes shining, her whole face suddenly radiant.

"Do you think it possible to help him now?" she asked eagerly. "Is it in any way possible. Oh, if it were"—she clasped her hands in her earnestness—"I would give anything, all I have, to spare him one moment’s suffering!"

She said this to the man who would have sold his own soul to cheat Laurence Gray out of a moment’s joy.

"I am sure it is possible," Vickers replied decidedly. "Laurence himself cannot be reached, of course; but his warders may be got at, and money given to them would secure him as much kindness and comfort as a prisoner can have. I have found out where he is."

"I also know," interrupted Geraldine, in a tone that thrilled with gladness.

Vickers started to his feet.

"You know? ‘How?’"

"I have had a letter from him; I will read you some of it."

Vickers sat aghast, until suddenly it occurred to him that at stated intervals prisoners were allowed to write
to their relatives and friends. He cursed in his heart the laxity that permitted them this privilege.

Geraldine did not see the change upon his face. She had moved away towards the conservatory entrance, and was standing there in the shadow with her back to him.

"She's taking that letter from her breast," he said to himself. The thought made his blood boil. He clenched his hands convulsively, but instantly relaxed them again as Geraldine turned and came back across the long room with Laurence's letter in her hand.

"He is at Grimley," she said in a voice that was tremulous with unshed tears, and then she bent her mist-filled eyes upon the coarse prison paper. "They don't let him tell much—nothing about his daily life. But he is well, and does not seem despairing; and for both these blessings I thank God!"

The tears escaped, and rolled down her cheeks like falling pearls. But to Ralph Vickers they were as drops of gall whose very sight poisoned his blood.

"Can you write back to him?" he asked in a stifled voice.

"I have written already," answered Geraldine, smiling brightly through her tears. "But it was according to the prison rules printed on the back of this letter. They let one say so little. It nearly broke my heart to write such a miserable little note. But I said that my love for him, and my trust in him, were just the same, that they would always be the same. That assurance will help him to bear the long, hard days until the truth comes out, and he is released."

She stopped a moment, and stood looking doubtfully at Vickers, as if wondering whether she had said too much.

"I speak freely to you, Mr. Vickers," she added, "because you are my father's friend, and you have assured me that you are Laurence's and mine. I know Laurence was friendly towards you. He esteemed you highly."

No stab of self-reproach or remorse wounded Vickers's treacherous heart at these words. He answered with feigned earnestness:
"And I will repay his esteem by devoting myself now to his service and yours. To prove to you how much I have been trying to help you, I will tell you this: I did not expect he would be able to write and I made great efforts to find out where he was going to. I succeeded so far that I was on the railway platform when his gang started from London—"

"And you saw him?" cried Geraldine.

"I saw him and spoke to him. I tried to tell him how true you were, and hopeful; but before I could get out all the words, a warder pushed me away."

Geraldine walked to and fro with her hands clasped in eagerness.

"How good you were!" she murmured. Her tone sent a thrill through Vickers's passion-fevered veins.

"What did he look like?" she asked next. "Was he pale? Was he altered?"

"So altered that even you might not have recognised him. He was cropped and shaven, and ashy pale; very thin, too, and in chains."

"In chains?"

"He had handcuffs on, and was chained to the rest of the gang by a long chain."

Vickers was delighted thus to paint the degraded aspect of his rival. Geraldine—the beautiful, wealthy girl, bred in luxury, to whom all hardships seemed doubly cruel—gave a short, sharp cry of indignation and grief.

"And I cannot save him—cannot redeem him!" she wailed, walking over the thick, soft carpet. She looked around the room. "What right have I to be here—in comfort, in warmth, in guarded safety—while he is outcast and wretched, with his good name falsely blighted, and his hopes—our hopes—destroyed? But I will help him!" She stopped, and turned to Vickers.

"Did you say that the prison warders might take money? I will give them anything—everything I have—if only they will be kind to him."

"They will probably take money," said Ralph Vickers reassuringly, "although it may be risky to tempt them. I can go down to Grimsley and find out the warder who has most charge over Laurence. Most of the officials
of Grimley, I understand, have their homes outside the prison, and I would try to arrange with him to treat Laurence as well as is possible under prison regime. And as I have found out that a convict’s life may be made bearable or unbearable, according to the kindness or cruelty of the warders he is placed under, I have no doubt that our bribe would effect a most happy result.”

“Bribe!” repeated Geraldine, recoiling, and the ugly word sounded strange from her pure lips. “Would it be that? Would it be dishonourable—breaking the law?”

Vickers smiled. He saw that he must be careful of this noble-minded girl’s delicacy. He wondered what she would think if she saw his naked soul with its black record of treachery and crime.

“It is not exactly what the law would approve of,” he answered. “But you want to save him from needless suffering that perhaps might lead to madness.”

“Madness!” Her golden head was thrown back, and her face lifted, white with horror. “Oh, Heaven! Might it drive him to that?”

“It might. But we must prevent it. I will take all the money I have——”

“No, no,” she interrupted silencing him with a gesture. “I will find the money. It is my duty; it is the one thing that I can do now to show how dearly I love him, and that I am waiting for him still. Will you go soon? How much money will you want?”

“A great deal, I am afraid. But at first thirty pounds will do. I may have to pay my way to a hearing, you see.”

“Yes, you must not spare money. I will get the thirty pounds now. When will you go?”

“As soon as I can get away. That depends on your father. By the way, is he to know of this?”

Geraldine paused on her way to the door.

“I think not—not yet,” she said slowly. “He is the dearest of fathers, the kindest of men: but he does not love Laurence as I do; and he might not see that good may come of our action in this matter.”

Vickers smiled softly to show that he understood. But when the door closed behind her his smile assumed a different expression.
Almost immediately he heard the light sound of her returning footsteps, and the soft rustle of her dress. He thought that the room grew brighter as she re-entered it.

She handed him the money she brought—blessed money, that might perhaps buy some little ease and peace for her beloved—and then asked when she should see him again.

"Before I start," he said; "as soon as my plans are fully made."

"Then I need not wish you God-speed to-night," she rejoined.

He held out his hand with pleading in his smile.

"Will you take my hand now?" he asked softly. His voice, his dark persuasive eyes, his whole manner had a fascination that was powerful even over those who doubted him. And Geraldine doubted him no longer.

"I have been unjust to you, Mr. Vickers," she said.

And then, bidding him good-night, she touched with hers that right hand that had driven the knife into Charles Kesteven's breast. Alas! why did not an avenging Fate make the accusing blood-spots re-appear in that dark moment on the smooth white skin whose outward cleanliness was a lie?

CHAPTER X

THE RIVAL'S TREACHERY

"Yes," said Warder Gannaway, as he lighted his pipe by the gas-jet in the little public-house that Laurence Gray had noticed outside the boundary of Grimley Prison; "yes, you may say as you like, mate; but if there's one sort of a lag I hate more'n another, it's a gentleman lag. A chap that's in for faking the broads, or doing a crack, or anything of that sort—a good out-and-outer—I can keep him under pretty tidy. But a gent—one of your 'ristocratic, lawn-tennis gentlemen lags—why, I hates the very sight of them."

"Ooh! you're too hard upon the poor gentlemen entirely, Mister Gannaway," said another warder, whose
name was O'Reilly. "Now let me ax you what objection
yez have to the lag yez were spakin' of the other day?
Now, you know the boy I mane—what's this his number
is again? Arrah! was there iver such a head as mine
for figures? Him as came up from London wid the
last gang. Sure, it was 'ninety-nine' wasn't it? and
that's anaisy enough number to reemember any way.
Well, is there anything distasteful to yez in that boy
at all, at all?"

Gannaway did not answer at once. The aroma of a
cigar caused him to look round the partition, behind
which a stranger in a tourist suit sat reading a newspaper.
"Well, as to that chap," he now said, "he's not so
bad as I expected when I first saw him in his cell.
He's not so cheeky as some. He's an out-and-out green
hand and not up to the graft yet. But he's a lifer,
and I bet I'll make summat out of him before I've done
with him." Here he nudged his companion's elbow,
and added in a half-whisper: "Who's this bloke in
the next bay, Jerry?"

"Faith, I don't know. He's been there for the last
hour and more—some gentleman on a walking tower,
maybe. Hello! time's nearly up, begorra! Well,
good-night to yez."

Warder O'Reilly went out, wiping some drops of
"Irish" from his beard. Warder Gannaway pre-
sently followed, but had not gone far in the direction
of his cottage when some one touched him on the arm.
"Can you tell me if I could get a room for the night
in one of these cottages, officer?" asked Ralph Vickers.
"Well," said the warder, "if so be you're not par-
ticular as to its size, I believe my missis wouldn't mind
taking you in. If you'll come along I'll see about it, sir."

Gannaway was on duty, and his evening was free.
An hour or so afterwards he was sitting at his hearth
smoking one of Vickers's cigars. Vickers sat opposite
to him. Mrs. Gannaway had just gone out on her
Saturday's shopping. Already Vickers had gathered
a good deal of information regarding prison rules and
discipline, but he had not yet achieved his object.

"Now as to this Convict 99. You say that's not his
registered number in Grimley. Never mind. We'll refer to him as '99.' Of course you know he's in for the brutal murder of Kesteven, the London accountant?"

"I don't know what his crime is, sir. But if so be he's a friend of yours—"

"Friend?—No, not a friend. I don't mind telling you that I have a grudge against him. It's not enough for me that he's simply in penal servitude."

"That's a different matter, sir. Well, what might you want to know about him? I can't break the byelaws, you know."

"Of course not," smiled Vickers. "That is, unless you are well paid—very well paid."

"H'm! a man must live, sir; and with a wife and six children—"

"Look here," said Vickers, jumping to the point and speaking with all the insinuation he could command, "the man is in your power. You can do as you like with him. You can make him very uncomfortable; give him harder work, deprive him of privileges. You can contrive that he shall write no more letters."

"Wait a bit, sir," interrupted the warder. "Before you go any further, what about the pieces? What about the risk I should run? You want me to make it hard for him. Well, I could do that easily enough but not without—ah, now, that looks like business!"

This last interjection was called forth by the sight of a dozen bright sovereigns. Vickers added two or three more, and passed them over to Mr. Gannaway, who spat upon them, and slipped them into his pocket.

"Now," continued Vickers, "you can make his life a hell. Never mind what he suffers. You can drive him to anything—anything, do you hear? even to killing himself. He's a curse to his family, and they'd be glad enough to hear that he was under ground."

Warder Gannaway whistled, and jingled the golden coins in his pocket.

"Whew! That's how the wind blows, eh? But it's risky, sir. If I was to get dropped on, you see—"

"Have no fear. I'll give you a name and address that will find me, and you shall not want for another
supply of money when you satisfy me. Send me a newspaper by post, and I shall know by that that you are doing your best to make his life hard. And when you let me know that he is dead—dead mind you—whether by suicide, or by hard work, I'll pay you five, six, ay, ten times the amount I've now given you. By the way, what happens if a convict tries to escape?"

"You may well say tries, sir. 'Tisn't often a lag succeeds in doing more at Grimley. What happens? Why, if he's not caught in any other way, he gets a bullet in him. That's what happens, sir."

Vickers's eyes glanced meaningly at Warder Gannaway, and Warder Gannaway seemed to understand.

The early hours of the next day saw the beginning of the terrible work thus villainously planned.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE EXERCISE YARD

It was earlier in the evening on that same Saturday of Ralph Vickers's journey to Grimley and interview with Warder Gannaway, and Laurence Gray sat in his cell re-reading for the twentieth time the letter that Geraldine had lately sent him in answer to his own.

He was very tired. He had laboured hard all day at the stone quarry, and since his return he had been busy with the preparations for Sunday—being cropped, putting on the clean clothes supplied to him, oiling his heavy working boots, taking in and arranging his weekly store of soap, candles, salt, cleaning-rags, and other necessaries, and washing the flaps in front of his cell door.

All these things had taken a long time, so that he had but a few minutes of freedom before the signal, "Beds down," would be given. But the interval, short though it was, was long enough to give him the delight of feasting his eyes once again on the written words of that letter already learned by heart—the letter from his beloved, the only thing of his own that he was allowed to retain in his cell.
He had brought his hard wooden stool close by the little flap-table where his candle stood. The flickering light of the little yellow flame shone on the lines of the dear message. It was short, and the words were chosen with some restraint, for Geraldine could not pour out her heart freely in a letter that must pass under strangers' eyes. But she had said enough to comfort her and sustain the weary, yearning spirit of her lover.

"You must not doubt me, Laurence," she wrote. "You must not tremble because there is no bond between us; because, as you say, you have nothing to hold me by. Dearest, there is a bond between us—the bond of love and faith. That in my eyes is as close as the ties between parents and children, sisters and brothers. To you, who but for me are alone in the world, I want to be not lover only, but mother and sister too, and best, truest friend. I cannot write much here, but again I implore you to be hopeful. You have your life, and I am so overwhelmed with thankfulness for that great relief that I cannot despair of the rest. Be patient, dearest, and hope."

He kissed the letter passionately. Yes, he would hope. Why not? He was innocent—innocent! It could not be that he would have to languish all the bright years of his life in penal servitude. Why, it might be that this was the last Saturday that would see him in prison. The last? Oh, Heaven, that it might be so!

The retiring signal came. There was a shock throughout the whole building, a reverberation, as the hundreds of prisoners let down the straps of their hammocks at once. Laurence prepared his sheets and blanket, and then, with many another kiss, laid his beloved's letter tenderly away between the leaves of his prison Bible. Finally, he blew out the sickly candle flame, leaving the cell in darkness save for the two little streams of light that came in through the window and beneath the door from the nearest gas-burner on the landing.

Scarcey had he got into his hammock when the bell for the change of warders rang through the prison. The day warders left, and the night warders came on
duty. Presently Laurence, lying thinking in his hammock, was conscious of a flash of light across his face. It was the lantern of Jerry O'Reilly, the night watch, going his first round of the cells.

Laurence little guessed that at that moment his bitter enemy—the man who hated him as evil men always hate the stainless and noble—was close by him, almost within a stone's throw of his prison walls, plotting for him increased suffering, and seeking to compass his death.

On the following morning, while the prisoners of his particular landing were at exercise in the yard, Warder Gannaway took an opportunity of closely observing the man whom he had engaged secretly to torture. Previous to his interview with Ralph Vickers he had paid no more personal notice to Convict 99 than to any other well-behaved prisoner under his charge. He had simply classed him among the "gentlemen lags," whom he regarded as his natural enemies and possible victims. Himself an ignorant man—formerly a private in an infantry regiment, and now glorying in his authority over a few score of criminals—Gannaway felt himself at a disadvantage in dealing with such as were educated men, whose quick recognition of an injustice and readiness to resent an undue severity on the part of their warders kept him in constant check. Prisoners of the brutal sort, the seasoned lags, were inclined to the belief that a warder possessed unlimited power, and they submitted to whatever cruelty was imposed upon them without running the risk of further incensing the "screw" against them by reporting him. Men of better education very well knew that a warder is bound by the prison bye-laws no less than themselves, and that a prisoner may report a breach of discipline and appeal to the governor in cases wherein a warder has overstepped the limit of his authority. If over a prisoner reported Warder Gannaway to his chief, it was ten chances to one that it was a gentleman lag who did so.

Of course the mere reporting affected him very little. He was secure in the consciousness that Captain Podmore, the governor of Grimley, regarded all convicts as
dogs, and that the word of a prisoner was never listened to in opposition to that of an official. Gannaway’s principle, however, was to avoid doing anything that might be construed as an act of personal spite, and he was now meditating by what means he could fulfil his engagement with Ralph Vickers without the risk of Convict 99 discovering his intentions.

He watched Laurence Gray from a distance. The lag with whom Laurence was walking wore the blue braid facings that indicated he was a prisoner of the first class, working the last few months of his five years’ sentence. His hair had been allowed to grow, and he was being fattened up for his release, so that his wife, if she were still alive, might imagine that he had been fed like a lord in prison. Laurence appeared to be talking with him with unusual interest. It was a small chance, but Warder Gannaway took advantage of it. He went towards the two men.

"None of that chattering there!" he growled. "Here Ninety-nine, fall back to the rear. I can see what you’re up to. I know your tricks, getting alongside of a man that’s going to be released. You’re sending some message by him to your swell friends. Fall back to the rear. By the left, close up the files, there."

Laurence, thus separated from a man whose conversation had given him a few moments’ surcease from the bitterness of gnawing regret, found himself placed with an old grey-haired man who was a stranger to him.

It was not long before his new companion spoke.

"Not much chance of choosing one’s companions here, mate, is there?" he said under his breath.

"No," said Laurence. "But I see no earthly reason why I should have been separated from that man. I’m rather vexed, as he happens to be from my own part of the country."

"Oh, yes. Two Thousand is a Lancashire man. Rather a sad case, his. Do you know the circumstances?"

"No. I respect the etiquette of not asking a man anything about his misfortune," said Laurence.

"Exactly. Quite right. But that man’s case is peculiarly sad. His offence against the law was
this: It happened that his child was ill with a quinsy, and she wanted some ripe fruit to eat. The father went out to a neighbouring orchard to buy a pound or two of jennet pears that grew there. The orchardman and his family were all out, and the house was empty. So our friend thought he would go to the pear-tree and take what fruit he wanted and pay for it another day. He was picking a few pears and pocketing them when the owner of the orchard returned, caught him and gave him into custody. He was too poor to afford counsel; his plea that he really meant to pay for the pears was not listened to, and it was proved that he had been unfortunate once before. The case went against him. His first offence, for which he served two months, was that his dog had killed some partridges in the preserves of the magistrate who tried him. For his second offence, the supposed stealing of four ripe pears, the same considerate representative of the law sentenced him to five years' penal servitude."

"It is monstrous!" cried Laurence.

"To this day," continued the old man, "your Lancashire friend does not know if his child recovered from her illness, or if his wife has been able to keep out of the workhouse."

"Hasn't he written or received letters?" asked Laurence.

"No. Unfortunately he lost his marks, and was denied the privilege of writing. Until his release he will know nothing of his family, nor they of him. A good deal may happen in five years, you know. Ah, talking of those ripe pears always makes my mouth water. But there you are, mate; if we break our country's laws we must suffer the penalty. I broke them. Heaven knows I was guilty, and my crime is being justly punished. I shall die a convict, for I can't outlive my sentence. There is hope for a strong young man like you. As for me—well, I shall have a nameless grave, I who have mixed with the best society in England."

Laurence looked down at the man's badge and saw that his sentence was similar to his own—life. He
gathered in further conversation that his companion had been a medical man with a large practice in Mayfair.

CHAPTER XII

MISHAP OR MURDER?

LAURENCE GRAY had heard many a sad life-history during the hours of exercise on Sundays, when the rigid rule against talking was somewhat relaxed. But the story of the Lancashire man—Convict 2,000—remained in his mind. It was a story which reminded him that, unhappy as was his own lot, there were others among his companions who endured an injustice not less hard. It was probable that this particular convict had lost his privilege of writing to his wife through his own misconduct or insubordination, but this made his case no less pitiable to Laurence, who had Geraldine’s letter to comfort him. What would he have done without that token of her love? His knowledge that it was safe within the leaves of his Bible made even his dismal cell seem to him like a home that he could go back to with pleasure. He determined to keep a strict watch over his conduct, and to preserve his precious privilege of again writing to Geraldine six months hence. That was a long time to wait, but it was comforting to have even this far-off pleasure to look forward to during the long days of torturing regularity of prison life.

The influences that now surrounded him were those of a ceaseless monotony and depression. His days were utterly joyless, hopeless, unbeautiful. His occupations were unmarked by a single deviation from the routine of a machine-like discipline.

Awakened at five o’clock in the morning, he washed in his bucket of water. No sooner was he dressed than a warder came round asking if he wished to see the doctor or the governor. The warder was followed by one of the convict orderlies, who handed into his cell a little brown loaf—the day’s allowance of bread. Then came the breakfast of a pint of gruel, sweetened with
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treacle—a nauseating mixture that he had difficulty in
crating, but which he usually managed to force down.

After breakfast came cell-cleaning. He washed
the slate floor with the water he had himself used. At
a quarter to seven he was marched with his neighbours in
single file to chapel for morning prayers, which were read
by one of the school orderlies. At seven the various
working gangs were formed in parties on the parade
ground. Every man was then carefully searched by
the warders, and if any contraband articles were found
concealed about his clothing—needles, pins, fragments
of string or paper, indeed anything except the one
article he was allowed to carry, his handkerchief—
they were taken from him. Nothing escaped the
searchers’ eyes, and woe betide the prisoner who was
found in possession of the merest fragment of tobacco!

After this first search of the day, the outdoor gangs
were marched out, attended by their armed warders
and the civil guard. Those having work inside the
prison, such as tailors, shoemakers, laundrymen, and
stocking-knitters, remained in the yard for an hour’s
walking exercise.

At eleven all returned to the parade-ground to be
again searched, and half an hour later dinner was
served in the cells.

The dinner on three days of the week consisted of
three ounces of fat mutton, or the same quantity of
boiled meat resembling indiarubber, with a few potatoes.
On two other days it was a pint of soup, thickened with
vegetables. On Thursdays a pound of solid suet-pudding
took the place of meat, and on Sundays bread and cheese.

A rest of forty minutes was allowed after dinner,
during which Laurence was glad to read a few pages
of his library book. The literature of the prison is,
like the suet-pudding, heavy. After dinner the third
search of the day was made. Then to work again,
until a quarter-past five, when the prisoners, being
previously searched for a fourth time, were taken back
to their respective cells for their supper of a pint of cocoa
with the remains of their day’s loaf of bread.

Every night, as the various gangs knocked off work,
a party of thirty or forty men were selected without previous notice and marched off to the bath-house. With this one exception, the routine of every day was invariable. The work, the food, the whole surroundings week by week, never varied. All was weary, monotonous regularity.

But for Laurence Gray a change was imminent.

On the first working day after he had made the acquaintance of Convict 2,000, he noticed that Warder Gannaway was unusually strict and watchful. Laurence, unaccustomed as yet to heavy labour, had suffered many severe pains in his limbs after wheeling about his barrow of large stones in the cuttings of the quarry. On this day the sun was very hot, and the perspiration poured in streams down his bronzed face. Every time he returned with his empty barrow to the cutting, he looked about for the water-carrier, gasping for a few drops of the precious liquid to relieve the burning dryness of his parched throat. By a singular coincidence, the water-can was at those times empty. Twice when he was about to ask for a drink he found the can in the hands of Warder Gannaway.

"All right, Ninety-nine," said Gannaway. "It's all gone this time. Wait till you come back again."

But when Ninety-nine returned it was just as before—there was no water for him.

"None of your grumbling now," said Gannaway gruffly, when Laurence, for the fifth time of his disappointment, ventured a remark. "If you're not satisfied with your job, come here, into the shade and help get down these stones from the top of the slope."

"Do you mean that I am to leave my barrow, sir?" asked Laurence.

"Yes. Go up to the top of the incline there, and move down those larger blocks."

Laurence obeyed, wondering at this change in his work. Climbing the slope, he put his hands to a heavy block of unhewn stone, and, clearing the debris from around it, worked it laboriously down, inch by inch, to the level ground, where the empty barrows waited for their loads. The work was hard for his hands, but
it was a change from wheeling the loads in the hot sunshine, and he was not ill-pleased. Besides, he did manage at last to get the water for which he craved.

He had been at his new occupation about an hour, and in another forty minutes or so it would be leaving-off time. He had attacked a very heavy block of stone that was difficult to dislodge. Warder Gannaway now stood above him at the top of the height.

"Get below the stone, man, and pull it over from the top," ordered the warder.

Laurence followed his instructions, and, exerting all his strength, moved the stone and balanced it on one of its jagged points previously to turning it gently over. Suddenly, as he stood bearing the weight up with his strong arms, on which the strained sinews stood out like knotted cords, he thought he saw the warder’s foot rest on the top of the stone and give it a violent push. The great block swayed for an instant; Laurence felt his strength give way beneath its overwhelming impetus.

"Look out below, there!" he cried, springing aside and falling over. The heavy block of stone came down upon his left hand. He felt the bones of his fingers crunch and crack. Then, as the stone plunged down the steep incline, he heard a fearful cry of agony.

"Help! help!" shouted several of the convicts.

Laurence rose to his knees and looked down the slope. He saw the block lying on the prostrate body of one of his fellow-prisoners. He slipped down the incline, and with his uninjured hand helped two other men to raise the weight from where it had fallen. Then he looked into the face of the man who had been struck down.

"It’s that lag as was near the end of his time," said one of the convicts at his elbow.

And Laurence recognised the man who was in prison for stealing the pears. He was quite dead.

Warder Gannaway had missed his mark.
CHAPTER XIII

THE PURSUING TYRANNY

By the time that the dead man had been raised into an empty wheelbarrow, the great bell of Grimley prison rang out across the intervening stretch of moorland, and the quarry gang left their work, and fell into marching lines.

Laurence Gray, his hand bleeding and giving him agonising pain, walked in the ranks, thinking over the dreadful sight he had just witnessed. Warder Cannaway walked on in front as though nothing unusual had happened; but at the prison gate he waited until Laurence was passing him.

"Thank your stars that you're not in that man's place," he said gruffly. "It was all through your carelessness that the accident happened. Well, what's done can't be helped. You had better go into the hospital ward and get your hand dressed."

"Thank you, sir," said Laurence, too much distressed in mind to think of accusing the warder of having been the real cause of the terrible calamity.

One of the assistant-warders then conducted him into the hospital ward, where the body of Convict 2,000 had already been carried. Laurence sat down on the first prison stool he came to and waited for the doctor. From where he sat he could see two of the hospital orderlies undressing the dead body. The blood-stained clothes were carried away to be cleared, so that they might serve again for another wearer. Presently the doctor entered, followed by the governor and the chaplain.

Captain Podmore was a typical prison governor, stern, unbending, soldierly, and somewhat fierce of aspect. He was scrupulously neat and even dandified in his attire, and had the air of one who was not to be trifled with.

He walked at once to the body over which the doctor was bending.

"Is he dead?" he asked.
"Quite dead," replied the doctor. "His chest is completely crushed."

Here Laurence came forward, volunteering a detailed account of the affair. But the governor cut him short.

"Never mind details. The thing’s done now, and can’t be undone. Confound carelessness on somebody’s part, that’s clear."

"What are you doing here, my man?" asked the chaplain kindly of Laurence.

Laurence explained about his injured hand. Mean while the governor had turned again to the doctor.

"Better get the inquest over and the fellow put underground at once," he said. "Can’t have him kept this hot weather."

Laurence was presently ordered to step further into the ward, and he found himself in a large room surrounded by iron gratings, behind which he saw several beds with the sick prisoners lying upon them. The doctor gave him some water to drink, and proceeded to dress his hand with splints and bandages. The operation occupied the best part of an hour. The final bandages were being sewn on when the chaplain, who had gone out, returned again, carrying a cup of hot tea.

"Here, drink this, my man," he said, laying the cup and saucer upon a little table.

"You are very kind, sir," said Laurence gratefully.

For reply, the chaplain smiled kindly as he went away.

"There," said the doctor; "that will do. Come to me again to-morrow morning. You will be saved from work for a week or two."

"Thank you, sir."

As Laurence was going out of the ward, his passage was barred by the men who were attending to the body of the dead convict. Beside it stood a long wooden shell, resembling a packing-case, together with another box filled with dirty sawdust. On the unplained lid of the larger box a warder was chalking the number "2,000." This was to be the deceased man’s only epitaph. The naked body was laid in the box, which would be filled up with the sawdust by and by when the
inquest should have satisfied all proper requirements in the matter of formality. Then the lid would be nailed on and the curious casket of humanity deposited in the bare and lonely prison cemetery. Laurence foresaw all this with sickness at his heart. In looking round, he did not fail to notice that these ghastly preparations for burial were taking place within the view of several of the infirmary patients.

An assistant-warder reconducted Laurence to his cell. After the horror of that quarry death, and of the scene he had just witnessed, solitude seemed a blessing, an unutterable relief. He thought of the poor man who was dead—killed, when, after nearly five years of unjust, or at least extreme, punishment, he was on the very brink of freedom! He had been full of joy at the prospect of returning to his home, clasping his loved wife again to his breast, learning whether or not the little child, for whose sake he had taken the fatal pears, had died. And now, he was dead—suddenly, by a horrible death—and the humble home would never see his return. His unshrouded body would soon be thrust into a nameless grave, and no one—not even his nearest and dearest—would ever learn the truth concerning his fate.

And all for the taking of a few poor pears to ease the throat of his suffering child!

At the thought of the pity and the sadness of it, Laurence gave a great sob—dry, tearless, but laden with his whole soul’s agonised protest. In his utter loneliness, in his great need for comfort, he sought Geraldine’s letter. That fragile sheet of paper was like a living thing to him, a perpetual well-spring of human love and sympathy in the parched desert of his present bitter lot. Eagerly he sought it in its sacred place between the leaves of the Bible. It was strangely difficult to find this time. He opened the Bible feverishly, turning the thin pages with his un-injured hand, while drops of dread came out upon his forehead. At last he staggered backward with a hoarse cry.

The letter was gone!
CHAPTER XIV

THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE

No one seeing Ralph Vickers as he walked down Regent Street on a certain July morning would have imagined that he was in any way preoccupied or perplexed. His handsome dark face was unclouded, and his step was light and free. With his faultless clothes and easy distinguished bearing, he looked aristocratic to the finger-tips; and more than one girl, as she glanced at him in passing, thought what an ideal lover he would make, and perhaps carried his image mirrored for a time in her mind.

But inwardly he was much disturbed. Since his journey to Grimley he had been revelling in the thought that Laurence Gray was tortured, crushed, doomed. Occasional newspapers sent by Warder Gannaway tacitly informed him that his wishes regarding Convict 99 were being carried out. So far, this was satisfactory. But now Gannaway had asked him for more money. The dishonest warden’s application was inconveniently speedy; but it could not be disregarded. He must be satisfied somehow.

Vickers was just thinking that he must ask Geraldine Lucas for the necessary money, when his eyes were attracted by a victoria that was approaching up the handsome thoroughfare. There was one lady seated in it, and he knew in an instant that it was Geraldine herself. No other woman had that faultless poise of the head, that charming dignity and grace of attitude. As the carriage drew near, he stepped forward so that she might see him. The carriage drew up beside the kerb.

"I am so glad to have met you," said Geraldine, after responding to his courteous greetings. "I wanted to speak to you."

She glanced towards the coachman, and Vickers understood. She wanted to speak to him about Laurence Gray, and was wondering if the servant would overhear. For a moment a cold, snake-like anger rose up in Vickers’s heart at the thought that but for Laurence Gray she.
would have driven past him with the merest cold salute. But he crushed the resentful feelings, and called a seductive smile to his lips as she turned her violet-grey eyes again upon him.

"I think we can talk here, safely, if we speak low," she said.

The fuller revelation of her stately grace as she moved on her cushions in order to lean closer towards him made his passion-thrilled blood run quicker in his veins. Her long fawn-coloured cloak showed the perfect moulding of her figure, and above it her proud, fair head and flower-like face rose with a rare poetic beauty that caught and held the eyes of all who passed her.

Vickers noted, too, how the sweet summer air had brought an added richness to her cheeks, a tender transparency to her fair skin. Oh, what delight, what triumph it would be to win this lovely woman for his own, to share with her her wealth, and to know that the man who disputed her with him was dead!

"I told you in my letter," he began, "how I got on at Grimley."

She nodded.

"Yes, but I want to know more. A letter does not satisfy an eager heart like mine." She smiled, and went on: "You said you saw the warder; what kind of a man is he?"

"A very good fellow. Not as honest as he might be, perhaps, or he wouldn't let us get over him so. But he's the sort of man who can be trusted, if only for the money's sake, to do everything he promises to do."

"And he promised to be good to Laurence—to be kind?"

"To be as kind as he dared be."

Geraldine clasped her hands under the folds of her cloak.

"Oh, I thank Heaven that we have been able to do this!" she breathed.

Then she fixed her beautiful serious eyes on Vickers's face.

"You are sure that the plan is succeeding?"

"Quite sure," Vickers answered. "I have had
several assurances from the warden that things are going on very well indeed. And only this morning I had a letter from him— I was thinking of it as I was walking down here, before I saw you—in which he says that Laurence is being so well treated that he himself noticed the change, and made a remark about it. The warden told him—as I had desired him to do—that it was through a lady's intercessions.

A light like the breaking of day over a fair landscape came upon Geraldine's face.

"So he knows!" she cried with subdued gladness.

"He has proof of my continued love!"

"The best proof," replied Vickers. You have become to him a protecting angel.

Vickers's command of his voice and features was wonderful. No one studying his expression now would have doubted that he spoke truth.

"Have you that letter with you?" Geraldine asked suddenly. "I should like to see it!"

Vickers was momentarily taken aback. He had not expected this. But he answered immediately, with an assumed regret:

"I am very sorry to say that I have burnt it. I thought it prudent to do so, as there would be danger in its falling into wrong hands, more especially as it contained an application for money."

Geraldine was displeased. She very naturally thought that Vickers had acted strangely in forbearing her right to see a letter concerning Laurence in relation to this matter in which she was the principal and Vickers only the instrument. She accepted his excuse, however. The joy of hearing that Laurence was happy was more than enough to cover a thousand petty grievances such as this.

"You say there was an application for money?" she proceeded, just as Vickers was framing his own request for the gold wherewith to carry out his vouchsafery.

"I will send you some more this evening. You shall have all that is necessary, even if I have to sacrifice my jewellery. You have comforted me exceedingly," she added, as she gave him her hand. "I don't feel now that Laurence is far away, although, indeed, I never have
felt that. He is so constantly in my heart that I sometimes fancy he is himself beside me. Even this morning I was thinking of him so that he seemed to be actually here sitting with me.”

Ralph Vickers smiled an answer to her smile, but he bit his lip sharply as her carriage drove away.

CHAPTER XV

RENEWED MISTRUST

That evening, at Fenton Court, as Geraldine and her father were at dinner together, Mr. Lucas said, not unkindly:

“Tis grieve to tell you, my child, that my opinion of Laurence Gray is changing. The examination of our books between the January audit and the date of Laurence’s arrest shows further embezzlements amounting to a considerable sum, while since his removal from the office the accounts have been absolutely correct. These facts speak volumes, Geraldine.”

“Tis there must be some mistake, father,” answered the true-hearted girl firmly: “I would stake my life that Laurence is as innocent of these thefts as he is of the crime for which he is now suffering unjust punishment.”

Mr. Lucas looked at her with tender sadness.

“For your sake, my child, I would like to believe so too. A little while ago my faith in Laurence was as strong as yours; but the facts are too clear against him. Even Mr. Vickers has been obliged to accept his guilt at last, although for friendship’s sake he put off conviction as long as he could.”

Geraldine started and grew pale.

“Mr. Vickers believed that Laurence embezzled?” she cried.

“Certainly,” replied her father; “it was he who pointed the matter out to me. He seemed greatly distressed about it. He had doubted, he said, as long as it was possible to doubt, but certainty at last was unavoidable. He is a very good fellow, is Ralph Vickers.
I must say, my dear child, that I wish it had been he who had won your affection instead of the other one."

Mr. Lucas sighed. Geraldine was silent, struggling with the bitter knowledge that even her dear father had forsaken her in her grief, and that henceforth her battle against fate for love and happiness must be fought alone.

"I have to-day made Vickers manager," proceeded Mr. Lucas presently. "The man who had taken Gray's place did not suit, and I am glad of the chance of showing young Ralph how thoroughly I appreciate his upright and manly character."

Geraldine made no remark of either approval or disapproval; but she felt the old vague distrust of Ralph Vickers spring up again in her mind.

This feeling was increased by something that happened on the following morning. As she was going out alone for an early walk, she encountered James Stinchcombe, the office-boy, who had been sent with a message to Mr. Lucas.

"Please, miss," said James, "I've got a message for you."

"For me?" said Geraldine.

"Yess. Mr. Vickers, 'e ses to me, 'James, if yer sees Miss Lucas abart Fent'n Court, tell 'er as the letter's been sent off all right.'"

"What letter?" asked Geraldine, perplexed at first.

"Oh, I d'now," said the boy. "I reckoned as 'ow you'd know all abart it. Mr. Vickers, 'e's fond o' sending of messages as is like riddles. But if you arst me, miss, why, I thinks as p'raps a letter as 'e 'id under 'is ledger yesterd'y artemoon I were in 'is office when the gov'nor—when Mr. Lucas call'd 'im art all of a sudden. Mr. Vickers sent me art before 'im, but when 'e were in the gov'nor's room I goes back, don't yer know, and looks wot it was 'e'd shoved away so sudden. I didn't mean no offence to you miss. I didn't know as you'd bin a-givin' 'im letters to send to 'im wot's—you know— to Mr. Gray."

"'Mr. Gray!" exclaimed Geraldine. "What do you mean, boy? Do you say that Mr. Vickers had a letter of mine—in my writing?"
"Well, leastways, it were in a lady's handwriting, and the piper 'ad ' Fenton Court, 'Ampstead,' printed in blue on it. No offence, miss, I ain't a-goin' to say anythin' abart it, and I asks yer pardon".

But Geraldine interrupted, startled at the boy's incomprehensible information.

"You say that the letter you saw was addressed to Mr. Gray?"

"Yass," and even he felt a little shyness as he answered: "It began 'My dearest Laurence.'"

"Do you think you could manage to get that letter by some means and bring it to me?"

"But Mr. Vickers 'ave sent it away, miss."

"No, it was not that one," said Geraldine "Try to get the one you saw in my handwriting, and post it to me here. I will reward you well for it."

"Right you are, miss, I'll 'ave a try for it. If I sits up 'arf the night a plannin' of o'w I'm to git it, git it I will, miss. Mr. Vickers is fly, 'e is; but 'e ain't more fly than me, I lay."

Two days later Geraldine received a letter in a boy's hand. It was from James Stinchcombe and it stated that though he had tried in all manner of ways he had not succeeded in finding the letter he had mentioned. He believed it had been destroyed. But he added that he could swear he had seen it.

Geraldine was restless with doubt and suspense. If the boy spoke truth, as she half believed, what part was Ralph Vickers playing? What could be the meaning of his possessing the letter that she had written to Laurence Gray?

CHAPTER XVI

CHECKMATE!

RALPH VICKERS was in high spirits. He was dining at Fenton Court, and Mr. Lucas was showing him a degree of attention that plainly marked the great advance he had lately made in his employer's esteem. It was true that Geraldine was colder to him than usual, but that