

"As to misunderstand your letter? No, my dear master, I understood it only too well, and its noble motive. But did you think I would, by flight, make your position still worse? Mercy forbid! So here I am, innocent as yourself, and happily able to go in and out in your service, and Miss Christina's."

And then Paul and the mercer began to confer, in low tones, apart. To the mercer's surprise Paul had already been to consult with an eminent legal friend of the knight's who had told Paul that, without going then into the question of guilt or innocence, there was one extremely important point to discover as soon as possible.

That point was the question of witnesses. Two were indispensable to the legal proof of an overt act of guilt.

How many witnesses, he had asked, would be forthcoming against the mercer? If not more than two, could not one or both of them be persuaded to take a pleasant trip to the Continent for the good of their health?

Two things were at last decided, the first, that Paul should move heaven and earth to get for counsel an early sight of the depositions, so that Paul might discover what witnesses were to be feared; and the second thing was, that Paul must show some sign of reality about the menial office so suddenly imposed upon him, and the mercer therefore sat down to be shamed.

When the door was opened to bring in provisions, while an armed guide stood aside, the mercer and his man were accordingly seen engaged in this very domestic and unreasonable kind of business.

Nobody doubted from that hour that Paul Arkdale was the knight's body servant, and before many days had passed there was no more popular person about the place than Paul Arkdale, once the mercer's apprentice—now his servitor!

Of course, Paul had changed his dress of gentleman the instant after the receipt of the mercer's warning letter.

CHAPTER XXIX. ANOTHER PAIR OF CONSPIRATORS.

The Lady Hermia was just setting out for the Tower, in hurried obedience to the mercer's letter, when she saw a good looking young fellow, in the garb of a serving man, but with the air of a man belonging to quite another class, approach respectfully her carriage in the coach-yard, and beg to be permitted to speak with her.

The instant she knew from whom he came she descended from her coach, and went back into the house, bidding Paul to follow her.

"I am very, very glad you are here," she said, "for now I can explain myself and avoid an act injurious to all parties. It is most important for me, with reference to the interests of a gentleman well known to Mistress Christina—"

"Pardon me, your ladyship, asking the question. Is it best, or not best for me to tell you what I know?"

"You mean you have heard of—"

"I have the honour, madam, to enjoy the friendship of Lord Langton, though I am no Jacobite!"

"Is it so? Is it so?" And while Lady Hermia's eyes rested on the ingenious, animated face of Paul, the tears gathered in the lids, and were beginning to fall. "Say then," she continued, "that for his welfare, and for theirs, it is most desirable I should keep aloof just now, so that my intercession may not be damaged beforehand. The state of the king's mind is terrible; and my father's is as bad, or worse."

"I will explain all this, your ladyship, to them; and I am sure it will comfort them to see how wisely you purpose to act."

And then Paul ventured, with as much of tact as he could, to indicate to Lady Hermia the extreme importance of Sir Richard's getting instantly either a copy of the depositions, or some trustworthy notion of the witnesses who were prepared to swear to the more important acts that were to be proved against the prisoners.

"My good Paul, do not stay now; my father is here, and might question you. I have learned all you want to know. There are two, and only two, witnesses who can depose to acts that, if believed by the jury, would be fatal. Here are

the names written down, and a brief memorandum of the essential facts they are prepared to swear to. Give my kind regards to Sir Richard, and to Mistress Christina the tenderest love and sympathy. Tell her to place full trust in me, so far as I have power. Unhappily, I find my power at present less than I thought it was! Quick, now, my kind, good Paul! I want you away."

With a charming smile she put out her hand, which Paul, with profound respect, kissed, and then he hurried off, she saying at the last moment—

"Remember that one witness will not be enough for the prosecution. They must have two, or fail!"

The very instant Paul got beyond the range of vision from the windows of the earl's house he drew forth the piece of paper, and read thus:

The serious part of the evidence is that Sir Richard was present at the masquerade, and, although that fact might by bare possibility be got over by Sir Richard's explanations and character, it would be suicidal to trust to such a conclusion in the face of a large amount of corroborative testimony against him, showing that Lord Langton lodged with him, and that the document discovered in the stick makes it so extremely probable that he knew and sanctioned the insurrection, if not even the murder.

Two witnesses only can be found to depose to the especially criminal overt act—the appearance at the masquerade on the very night of the initiation of the murder and of the insurrection. These two witnesses are the men whose names are written below.

CLARENCE HARVEY.

SCUM GOODMAN.

Paul's arms went up like those of a madman as he read the first name, and knew it meant Maria. And from that time how he moved along—whether walking or running—he knew not, so absorbed was he in the terrible anguish of this discovery.

CHAPTER C.—NEGOTIATIONS.

Paul did not after all go to the Tower with his news. He had fortunately already prepared the mercer for a sudden and unannounced departure; while, therefore, he was madly sweeping along through the streets by the river towards Tower Hill, the thought struck him that it would be well for him not to tell Sir Richard and Christina of what he was about to do, lest he should fail, and in failing compromise them, and perhaps by the attempt itself cause them to neglect effort in other directions.

"No," thought he, "if I now disappear for a few days, while this business is going on, she, at least, will urge him to exert whatever influence he had, and she will no doubt herself urge on Lady Hermia. So be it. I resolve at once; and now to begin."

And a curious beginning it was! Paul began to haunt the purlieus of Wapping, and to be seen in low ale-houses, now in this one, now in that, smoking, drinking, and making merry.

The ale-houses did not appear to answer his purpose, so he began to stroll about the quays and river banks of the "pool."

He was often hailed and asked if he wanted a berth, a question to which he gaily replied—

"Well, I'm thinking about it, if I can find a berth to my mind." And so saying he always went on board, and got into chat with the captain, or the captain's deputy, or the captain's wife, if he were not aboard.

It was noticeable that Paul did not seem to fancy large ships—did not loiter near them, but passed on. The sort of vessel that did strike his fancy he found at last. Strange choice! It was one of the most disreputable-looking of all the hundreds of other small craft near.

The captain happened to be lounging on the deck smoking, and Paul was charmed also with him, apparently because he too had a look only too much in harmony with his vessel. He seemed more like a smuggler, or what one might fancy would be the aspect of a wrecker, than of a fair-dealing, open, honest-hearted British tar.

Paul's eyes glanced at him as if he were a

newly-discovered species of man, and one of a particularly promising kind.

He crossed a plank and got on board the *Emma Jane*.

What say you, Captain, to a speculation, where the profits would be all settled beforehand, payment sure and prompt, and tolerably liberal?"

"For self and ship?" asked the captain.

"Yes, for self and ship!" re-echoed Paul.

"And how about cargo?"

"Say passengers," softly suggested Paul.

"Passengers, eh? That's the game. Rich folk, no doubt. Good reason, no doubt."

"Good pay, no doubt," said Paul, imitating with a laugh the captain's manner.

"Any risk in the job?"

"A little. We mustn't be caught."

"Shall you be with us?"

"Yes."

"Two hundred and fifty guineas, then, and I'm your man."

"And you'll carry off for that sum anybody I bring you?"

"Ay, and without axing him the question whether he likes to go, if you choose."

"That's the sort of spirit, my noble Captain. Not that this gentleman will be brought on board by any kind of compulsion. If he comes he will come of his own free will."

"At a price," suggested the sly captain.

"At a price," responded Paul; "and, as he's a determined gambler, you and he may pass your time very pleasantly."

"Ah!" ejaculated the captain, as though he at once coveted and feared the risking his newly-earned gold with a man who was probably a better card-player than himself.

"Well, that is what I want to say to you. When he does come on board, and says he is willing to go, then he mustn't be allowed to alter his mind—you know!"

"Exactly."

"Now then," said Paul, "let's break a sixpence, and the matter's settled; we shall have pledged faith to each other."

The coin was broken, and the bargain settled.

"I expect," said Paul, "to have a tough job of it in catching my man; but for every day's delay beyond a week I shall reckon ten pounds extra. Will that do?"

"Ay, ay; that's handsome and ship-shape! Push along!"

"You'll have to keep yourself and the charming *Emma Jane* ready at all hours of the day and night. I must rely on that. The loss of a few minutes might defeat the whole scheme."

"Put it down as part of the bargain, and then you know where am, and how to have me."

"What hands have you on board?"

"Not enough. I shall get more."

"Would more help you, if it comes to a race?"

"Of course they would! *Emma Jane* has been a smartish jado in her time, and can go at a spanking rate still, provided you only tell her you mean to get everything out of her she's capable of."

"Very well. Spare nothing that can increase speed, and when all's over, if the affair is a success, I will guarantee fifty pounds extra to pay for all odds and ends—new or mended sails, etc."

One part of Paul's scheme was thus happily settled, but its value was absolutely dependent on the success of the other part. Where was Scum Goodman? How was he to be dealt with? No doubt he could be bribed, but unfortunately he had not, like the captain, a character even to sell, his was so bad in money matters.

Pondering over the whole subject, it struck him that it might be worth while to visit the private home of the Chief of the Secret Service.

Then it occurred to him it would be also well so to time his visit that the chief should then be at his office. So Paul took an apartment for a week just opposite the chief's house, and announced himself as a singing man from the country, who wanted to hear a little of the music in the Abbey, before trying for a situation in the choir.

(To be continued.)