

were going to Liverpool. But I do happen to know that just at that very time Kreefe and his wife left Normanford; and it was given out that they had gone to America.

"Well, I thought after this that I had got a clear case against my Lady, such a one as ought to bring me in something handsome; and so it would have done, had not other things turned out badly. Sedgeley Court was safely cracked, and I got my share of the plunder; but unfortunately the police got hold of Bill Stuckley for it, and he peached when in prison; besides which, my plan of the house was found on him; so one fine morning, he and I and Charley had the pleasure of hearing that we were to be sent on our travels into foreign parts for several years to come. Before sailing, I sent a message to Lady Spencelaugh, telling her I wanted to see her on important business; but either she never got the message, or else she wouldn't come. But the secret was one that would keep, and I determined to keep it till I got back home. At the end of ten years, I found myself in the old country again, hard up. I had made up my mind that as soon as I got the means, I would run down to Belair, and pay my Lady a visit. Before I could do this, however, I fell in with an old friend of Charley's, and was persuaded to join him in a little affair, for which we both got into trouble; and the rest you know.

"And now you've got the whole boiling out of me; and my opinion is, that I'm a cursed fool for my pains. I ain't a superstitious cove, but I can't help thinking that if I had acted square by the lad, as I promised him, things might have gone more square with me. But, what can't be cured must be endured. One thing I do know—that writing is deuced dry work; so, now that this job is well out of hand, I'm dead nuts on to a tumbler of old rum, and a pipe of choice negro-head. Yours to command, JIM BILLINGS."

"P.S.—I haven't bothered you with any dates in my letter, but I can give you them all as ninepence, whenever you may want them."

CHAPTER XXXVI.—MR. PENNING'S PROPOSITION.

"A very characteristic production!" said Mr. Greenhough, as Mr. Penning finished reading the ex-convict's statement. "Mr. James Billings's old skill as a begging-letter impostor has stood him in good stead in that ingenious piece of composition. Faugh! The whole narrative is redolent of the Old Bailey!"

The baronet chuckled, and then instantly became grave again, as though he had been caught in some dereliction of duty. The vicar, too, looked very grave, and was conning his notes seriously. Mr. Greenhough had a strong opinion of the vicar's clear good sense, and he felt vaguely uneasy at the expression of that gentleman's face; for the lawyer himself was quite serious in believing that the whole affair was nothing more than an ingenious conspiracy got up to defraud the rightful heir.

Lady Spencelaugh said no word, but sat quite still, with one hand clasped in that of her faithful friend, Martha Winch; and with her eyes bent mostly on Gaston—that son for whose sake she had risked so much. Gaston himself sat biting his nails moodily. The olive of his cheek had paled somewhat during the last half hour. Title, houses, and lands seemed to be slipping from under his feet in some incomprehensible way, just at the moment when he had begun to realise them as being all his own. If he were not Sir Gaston Spencelaugh, the richest baronet in all Monksheire, what would become of him, by Jove! with that threatening array of bills, and duns, and post-obits hemming him in, and stopping up every avenue of escape; and ready to swoop down upon him the moment his misfortune should get wind, and crush him remorselessly, as by the *peine forte et dure*! He would shoot himself; by Jove! that's what he would do—it was the most gentlemanly mode of writing Finis to one's Memoirs—and give them all the slip that way.

"What further evidence have you to offer in support of this extraordinary charge?" said the vicar at last, breaking a silence that was becoming oppressive to every one.

The next evidence put in by Mr. Penning was

that of Margaret Fennell, at present a resident in Grellier's Almshouses; who deposed, that in a certain month of a certain year, Martha Winch, and her brother, Jeremiah Kreefe, took to the house known as White Grange a boy, apparently about five years of age; which child, after being kept locked up in the said White Grange for the space of six weeks, was taken away one evening after dark by the two before-named persons, and never seen by her, Margaret Fennell, afterwards.

Mr. Penning next brought forward the evidence of Mr. Edwin, ex-master of the Foundation School at Normanford; who deposed to having been at Liverpool on a certain day of a certain year, and to there seeing Dr. Kreefe, his wife, and Mrs. Winch accompanied by a boy apparently about five years old, alight from a cab at one of the docks. Mr. Edwin further deposed to seeing Mrs. Winch bid farewell to her brother and his wife; and to seeing the two latter, accompanied by the child, go on board a vessel named the *Lone Star*, which vessel, as he found from after-inquiry, was advertised to sail for New York at high-water that very day.

The next piece of evidence put in by Mr. Penning was the Statement written by John English at Pevsey Bay, and sent by him to Miss Spencelaugh. Mr. Penning read this Statement aloud, as he had done the previous evidence. In it, as may be remembered, John English spoke of his early life in America with the Kreefes; and how the lame doctor had at last contrived to get rid of him. He mentioned his recognition of the doctor's portrait at the *Hand and Dagger*; and how he became acquainted with the contents of the note intended for Lady Spencelaugh; and of his sudden dismissal from Belair the day after Mrs. Winch's return to Normanford; together with various other minor matters, some of which had been brought out more strongly in the previous evidence, but all tending to establish the truth of his story.

"This concludes our case as it stands at present," said Mr. Penning as he refolded John's manuscript.

"In the absence of Mr. English, as I must still continue to call him," said the vicar, "I really don't see what further steps can possibly be taken in this matter. But perhaps Lady Spencelaugh may have something to say to all this?"

Mr. Greenhough was whispering earnestly with my Lady and Mrs. Winch, and presently he came forward, and addressing the vicar and the baronet, said; "Lady Spencelaugh desires me to deny most emphatically the truth of the allegations contained in the statements just read to you by Mr. Penning, so far as they affect her Ladyship. The evidence of the convict Billings she states to be without the shadow of a foundation in fact—at least that portion of it which relates to the late Master Arthur Spencelaugh: whether the rest of it be true or false, is a matter of no moment. Mrs. Winch, the respected landlady of the *Hand and Dagger*, is quite willing to admit that there was a child taken to White Grange by herself and brother, and that the same child was afterwards taken by Dr. Kreefe to America; but that the child in question was Master Arthur Spencelaugh, she most positively denies. At the proper time and place, Mrs. Winch will be prepared to prove who the child really was, and explain why it was found necessary to get him out of the country in such a surreptitious manner. For the rest, until this Mr. English turns up, and proves his own case more completely, and to better purpose, than his advocates have done for him, we shall sit down contented with the nine points of the law which we have in our favour. We don't think that this Mr. English ever will turn up in this neighbourhood again. We believe him to have been wise in his generation, and to have "made tracks," as the Yankees say. Should he, however, have the rare impudence ever to shew his face in this part of the country again, we are quite prepared to have him arrested as a common impostor. Six months' oakum-picking would, I opine, go far towards checking his ambitious proclivities for the future. I may add that Lady Spencelaugh cannot but feel intensely grieved that any one for whom she has felt so warm an

affection as she has for Miss Spencelaugh, should have taken a course so unwarranted, so opposed to sense and good-feeling." Here Mr. Greenhough caught the vicar's eye fixed on him, and there was something in it which told him he had better stop. "But the subject is a painful one, and I refrain from adding more," he said, and then sat down.

My Penning rose. "We are not to bandy accusations" he said, "but to set right, as far as in us lies, a great apparent wrong. As stated by me before, I am quite at a loss how to account for the absence of Mr. English; but I have no doubt that when that gentleman does return, he will be able to furnish a satisfactory explanation of what at present seems so inexplicable. It is easy to call any man an impostor; but in the present case the term is a simple absurdity, as no one knows better than Mr. Greenhough himself. The facts which have been laid before you to-day having come to Miss Spencelaugh's knowledge, too late, I am sorry to say, for Sir Philip to be made acquainted with them, Miss Spencelaugh felt that this occasion, more than any other, was the one on which she ought to relieve herself of a responsibility which she was no longer prepared to carry alone. On you, reverend sir, and on your colleague, as executors under the will of the late lamented head of this family, that responsibility must now devolve; and in the absence of the person chiefly concerned, it will rest with you to decide, from what you have heard, as to what steps, if any, you may deem it requisite to take in the present contingency. Whatever decision you may arrive at, Miss Spencelaugh will abide by; but to say, as my legal friend has said, that the lady in question ought to have kept back the evidence which you have heard this morning, is equivalent to saying that she ought to have made herself accessory after the fact to what, if our case be a genuine one, is one of the most base and cruel conspiracies that ever came within the range of my experience. I say this without the slightest imputation on any person or persons here present. We can, however, go one step further in this extraordinary business, and one only; but that step, if you are willing to sanction it, may prove a most important one in testing the value of the evidence which has been brought before you to-day—that evidence which my legal friend has denounced as a wholesale piece of imposture. Gentlemen, we can open the coffin which is said to contain the body of Master Arthur Spencelaugh."

At these ominous words, a low cry of agony burst irrepressibly from the lips of Lady Spencelaugh, and a deathlike whiteness overspread her face. Gaston, thinking she was going to faint, sprang to her side; but she waved him impatiently away, and straightened herself presently, and summoned back a little colour to her cheeks, as though she were afraid lest any one should see how powerfully Mr. Penning's last words had affected her. They had taken every one in the room by surprise. Mr. Greenhough was fairly puzzled. His scepticism was beginning to be shaken in spite of himself. Up to this moment, he had really looked upon the whole affair as a cleverly concocted conspiracy; but his observant eye had not failed to note Lady Spencelaugh's evident agitation; and the audacity of Mr. Penning's proposition almost took his breath away.

Mr. Penning resumed. "You, Sir Michael, are, I believe, a county magistrate; and, unless I mistake, you, reverend sir, are vicar of the parish in which the church of Belair is situate; besides which, the family vault is private property; and, as the executors of the late baronet, you have, I opine, full power in that capacity to act as I have indicated, should you think well to do so."

"Really, Mr. Penning," said the vicar, "this proposition of yours is a most extraordinary one, and one on which I and my colleague are not prepared to decide without some consideration. But, in any case, we certainly could not think of proceeding in such a matter without the concurrence of Sir Gaston Spencelaugh, whom, notwithstanding all that has been said