By Gordon Holmes

THE ARNCLIFFE PUZZLE

Author of A Mysterious Disappearance

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

"I quite agree with you," said Lester. "It is an excellent thing that we are alone. But you will, perhaps, be disappointed to hear that my discovery has nothing to do with the death of Lord Anrcliffe."

"No, sir?" the query was put a little uneasily.

"No, Mr. Hobson. What I have found out is a very ingenious method of robbing his majesty's mails!"

Hobson saw instantly that his manipulation of the letter-box had not passed unnoticed. Nevertheless, he determined not to lose the fruits of his industry without a struggle.

"Indeed, sir," he said coolly, "I am afraid that won't help our case along very much. Still, the postal authorities are always very glad to hear about any new dodge of that sort."

"Oh, I do not think there will be any necessity to approach the post-office over this matter. Just hand me over Miss Holt's letter, and, as I wish that lady to be spared annoyance as far as possible, we will say no more about it."

"Miss Holt's letter?" exclaimed the other, assuming an expression of wooden surprise. "I don't—"

"Don't waste your finesse on me, my man, if you please!" said Lester, sharply. "I watched the whole business from my window, from the time you fixed up your contrivance in the mail-box until you went back and fetched it away, and with it Miss Holt's letter—the letter you are now carrying in your breast pocket."

Hobson, finding himself cornered, tried bluster.

"Look here," he began in the pompous tone of the policeman, "you must not interfere with me in the execution of my duty! I have authority for all I do and it is a serious matter to attempt to defeat the ends of justice."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Lester, contemptuously. "You have no authority to rob letter-boxes. You know as well as I do that it is an offence which might send you to penal servitude. However, I am not going to argue the point with you. Give me that letter, please!"

The detective tried another tack. "It's all very well, sir, for you to accuse me of taking letters from the box, but I am not to be bluffed by you or any one else. You may accuse me; your accusation will take a lot of proving."

Lester laughed—a laugh that had in it a quality which caused his companion to eye him alertly. In the course of a long experience of hard men he had never heard that kind of laugh without somebody receiving bodily injury in the near future.

"It will not take any proving," said Lester, curtly. "I am a bigger man than you, Hobson, and a younger man, and a stronger man. If you do not give me that letter this instant I shall remove it from your coat by the use of as much force as may be necessary."

Inspector Hobson looked up and down the road with a glance of bitter annoyance. It was a white ribbon of sunlit emptiness. There was no mistaking that the young doctor was brave enough in the discharge of his duty, he saw himself at a disadvantage in every respect. Physically he was no match for Lester, and in any case, he knew very well that his immediate superior, who was independent of the Metropolitan police, Scotland Yard is not too scrupulous in its methods of obtaining information, but the officer who is discovered in any sharp practice finds himself in the same unfortunate position as the secret-service agent who is caught with the plans of a fortification in his pocket. He is disowned with virtuous indignation by the country which employed him. The detective therefore surrendered at discretion and handed over Edith's letter with as good a grace as possible.

"There you are, sir," he said. "You must have your own way because I am in the wrong; but let me tell you, you are making a great mistake. If the young lady is innocent, it can't do her any harm—"

"No harm," interrupted Lester, indignantly, "to have her private correspondence tampered with?"

"Bless you, sir!" was the cheerfully brazen answer, "if it is just harmless correspondence, I should not have remembered a word of it five minutes after I had read it. I have enough to keep in mind without bothering myself with other people's private affairs. But one thing is certain. There is a man in this case, and when one gets hold of that man we shall be on the right track."

The detective noted with instant satisfaction that Lester's bronzed cheek paled a little. Here, then, was the opportunity. He had already suspected that the young doctor was in love with Miss Holt, and a magic touch of jealousy might transform the implacable enemy into a useful ally. Hobson was an astute judge of erring human nature, but he fell into the error of deeming all men alike.

"Likely enough," he went on, assuming a tone of parental benevolence, "the young lady has fallen into the hands of some scamp. It will be doing her a kindness to find out who he is and put a stop to his game. To tell you the truth, sir, I have a particular reason for believing that letter to be important. Now, if we just have a peep at it—"

"If you suggest such a thing to me again, I fear I shall be tempted to try and break your neck. Remember, I shall not tolerate any more pilfering of letters. Miss Holt has nothing to fear from you, Hobson, and her personal correspondence must certainly be sacred."

Lester walked away abruptly. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he turned back. "Here," he said, with something of apology in his voice. "Take this," and, dropping a sovereign into the detective's unsuspecting palm, he nodded and went off again at a brisk pace.

Indeed, he was already somewhat ashamed of himself. In his fiery zeal for Edith he had behaved rather like the hero of a melodrama, and he had all the true Englishman's horror of betraying emotion of any sort. Then again, this busybody of a policeman was acting only according to his lights, and those lights meant what the average man calls a disagreeable prying into other people's business.

Inspector Hobson's income, what with matters of private generosity and et ceteras—many et ceteras—approximated to five hundred pounds a year, and Lester's sovereign was the most unkind cut of all. He looked at it, and flung it to the ground, stamping upon it in a sudden access of fury.

"The cursed impudence of it!" he muttered.

The sovereign twinkled up at him from the gravel.

"I'll get level with him before I've finished," he growled, but the sovereign sparkled so that he picked it up and put it in his waistcoat pocket. And then he chuckled in his wrath.

"There were two letters," he said. "Let me see whether I have managed to keep the best one. You're clever, Dr. Lester, but you've made a mistake this time."

Edith had, in fact, posted two letters, and Hobson had given Lester only the first which came to hand. Now he sat on a grassy bank to investigate.

"'Sidney Holt,'" he read on the envelope—"I don't like that—and 'U.S.A.'—I don't like that either."

He produced a little implement like a pair of miniature curling-tongs, and inserting it in the corner of the envelope, gripped the edge of the letter and began to twist. This is an invention for which the world is indebted to the Russian censor. In two minutes Hobson had the letter out and in front of his eager eyes. He read:

My Dear Reggie.—Come home at once. I am in dreadful trouble. You can put things right for me. Lord Arncliffe's letter will explain that he gave the three hundred pounds to start you in America. Tell nothing to any one until you have seen me.

The eager critic read the letter through many times, but could find only transparent honesty in every line.

"Sometimes," he murmured, carefully returning it to the envelope, "I am almost afraid that the young lady is innocent!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Edith Resolves to Fight Alone.

Lester hastened onward, confident of catching Edith ere she reached the Hall. At the post-office he delayed to register the letter. With a man of Hobson's perverted ingenuity in the locality, this seemed to be the only safe course. The detective's suggestion that Edith was in correspondence with some unknown man caused Lester scrupulously to avoid reading the address. But he had been bound to glance at it in order to identify Edith's writing when Hobson handed it to him, and that fleeting glance had shown him that the letter was addressed to a "Miss" somebody or other. He was not altogether sorry.

This business concluded, he pushed forward at a swinging pace. Short cuts to the Hall were familiar enough to him now, and there was little chance that he would miss Edith. As it was, he came upon her sooner than he expected, for she had sat down on a rustic railing that protected a young tree. Musing over the tangled growth of mystery which surrounded her, she forgot time itself for a while.

And so he found her, her hands clasping her knees, and a whole tragedy of dejection in the melancholy droop of her head. She looked up at the sound of his footsteps, and greeted him with a smile of infinite sweetness.

"I am grown indolent, you see," said she, with a brave attempt at cheerfulness.

"I am glad of it," was the reply. "Had you continued your walk to the Hall, I might have failed to overtake you."

"Then you knew I was in the Park?"

"Yes, indeed. I saw you from my room at the Inn when you posted your letter."

"But that is ages ago!" exclaimed Edith, unconsciously reproachful.

"I know it is," said Lester, "but I was engaged in some investigations at the time, and the result is that I strongly advise you to register all your letters of any importance until matters have passed out of their present ridiculous impasse."

Edith looked at him in astonishment. "Register all my letters? But why?"

"I suppose I must tell you the whole story," said Lester. "I saw that detective, Hobson, fastening some contrivance in the letter-box—a kind of wire cage which fitted into the slot and was practically invisible. Directly you were out of sight he pretended to post a letter of his own and took the opportunity of securing yours."

Edith crimsoned with resentment. She sprang to her feet. That her correspondence should be at the mercy of such a man outraged every womanly instinct. Now Lester saw a new phase of her character. She was royally enraged; and the slenderness of the erect figure, and the tininess of the clenched hands, detracted nothing from the dignity of her anger.

"But this is infamous!" she exclaimed passionately, 'infamous!'

"Infamous, indeed! but pray do not be in the least concerned about it. Of course, I compelled him to hand me the letter at once, and I have taken the liberty of registering it in case he might tamper with the letter-box again."

"But did you get only one of my letters, Dr. Lester?" asked Edith, with a puzzled air, "I posted two, and—"

Lester flushed darkly with mortification and anger. "Good Heavens!" he cried, "idiot that I am! Wait, Miss Holt, and I will go back." He turned toward the village, intent to reach Hobson, literally at breakneck speed.

"Stop!" cried Edith. "Oh, Dr. Lester, please do stop!"

So Lester perforce returned to her, though reluctantly, and looking disconcerted.

"You cannot possibly do any good now," she said. "When he found himself detected, you may be sure he woul lose no time in making himself acquainted with the contents of the other letter. But tell me, to whom was the one he gave you addressed?"

"I did not look," was the reply, "but it will be on the registration receipt."

He handed her the slip of paper. Edith, reading the name, breathed a sigh of relief. The letter was to an old and trusted school friend whom she was inviting to come and stay with her.

Not for worlds would she have had its contents betrayed. It contained no confession of crime, no clue to the mysteries agitating Arncliffe, but in it George Lester was mentioned, and she had described him as a darling!

In her relief at this escape she was almost ready to forgive Hobson. "The other letter doesn't matter a bit," she assured Lester. "It is only to my brother in New York, and really there is nothing in it of real importance. I may tell you now, Dr. Lester, as this detective must know it, that the three hundred pounds which my kind friends seem to imagine I stole from Lord Arncliffe was given to me to—to start my brother in life."

Edith was a poor hand at concealment. Had Hobson been there to hear that little falter in her voice he would have scented a fresh intrigue, but Lester was ready to accept whatever she might say without question.

"I did not wish to speak of the matter," she went on, "since, after all, it is purely my own business; but it has led to so much malicious talk and has caused even my letters to be overhauled, that I think it best to explain. My brother has in his possession a kind message from Lord Arncliffe, in which the subject is referred to, and I have therefore asked him to come home and help me to face things. I things it will all be a little easier to bear if I have somebody to stand by me."

"I did not know you had a brother," said Lester. "Is he older than yourself?" He asked the question a little anxiously: an elder brother might have ambitions for his sister which would clash decidedly with Lester's aspirations.

"Oh, no, he is a mere boy; but he is all I have in the world. And he is at least man enough to protect me from insolence such as that of Hobson's today."

"Miss Holt, I beg you to believe that you are not without friends who would—"

"I know," she interrupted, "and that reminds me that I have not yet thanked you for your prompt interference on my behalf."

"Please do not make me recall how egregiously I blundered," he protested. "I am still wondering whether you will ever forgive me for leaving one of your letters in his hands."

"Why, so far as that is concerned, I think you have done me a service. At least it will show him that I obtained the three hundred pounds from Lord Arncliffe honestly. That," she added bitterly, "will reduce the number of crimes charged against me. Those remaining are the poisoning of Lord Arncliffe, the suppression of Mr. Bradshaw's letters in order to cheat him out of his inheritance, and the bribing of somebody to attack Mr. Aingier. Really, Dr. Lester, I wonder you care to take the hand of so dreadful a person."

"I will take your hand for good and all if you will give it to me?" rejoined Lester, stoutly. He was amazed and a little alarmed at his own boldness in the next instant, but win or lose, the die was cast now.

Edith drew away hastily.

"Oh!" she gasped, indignant at the monstrous unfairness of turning her own perfectly innocent remark into a weapon of attack against her. It looked as though she had invited his proposal, and so she endeavored to crush him with icy aloofness and a severe gaze before he could make any further advance. Only she could feel herself blushing hotly, and when that severe gaze of hers was met by his steadfast glance, her eyes had to drop and turn away. She strove to frame some flippant reply, and thus twist the incident into badinage, but a stolen glance at Lester's face had so demoralizing an effect that she only said "Oh!" again.

Lester had taken the plunge and he meant to go on.

"I am not going to say anything about the disparity of our positions," he said, "because, if you think me the sort of man to be influenced by your wealth, it would be utterly hopeless for me to address you at all. But you know that it is only yourself I want. I love you, and —and—"

Prior to timidity of the uncertain lover asserted itself, and he began to hesitate, and, hesitating, might have been lost, because, as his confidence waned, Edith gathered courage proportionately.

"I love you," he repeated with a curious iteration for a man who was to be so glib of speech.

Fortunately, it was a statement which Edith found interesting. For a moment she experienced an almost overmastering desire to fling herself into the sanctuary of his arms. He looked goodly and big and strong. Let him but stand at her side, and no one would dare attack her. And he loved her!

She put out a tremulous hand and touched him, as though to see if he were real. She lifted her brimming eyes to meet his ardent gaze. For an intoxicating instant she knew that she clung to him while he pressed hot kissed on her lips.

"Oh, no!" she cried piteously. "Oh, no! Not that! You must not!"

"But it is irrevocable, my darling," he whispered exultantly. "Oh, my little love, I have kissed you, and you are not angry! Say you are not angry!"

Edith put out her hands and held him from her. Let his arms close upon her once again, and she would have no courage to send him away. She sped off toward the Hall, Lester walking by her side and making earnest appeals to her to place all her trust in him. At last she recovered her self-possession. And she knew now than she too loved, but feared, as all good women love, with an utter lack of selfishness.

"I am not angry, Dr. Lester," she said, her voice faltering, but her face alight with a noble courage. "I believe —nay, I know—you are a good and honorable man, and as long as I live I shall be proud of the love you offer me. But I am proud, too, in another sense. If ever I become a wife I will go to my husband without a blot upon my name. It is not enough that I should know myself to be unsullied—I will be 'above suspicion' in the eyes of the world as well."

"But, my dearest, do you think I care—"

"No, it is I who care," interrupted Edith, gently. "Can you think me so reckless as to suppose I would put an end to your splendid career—expose you to the gibes of petty rivals as the man who married Edith Holt the murderess? You would end by hating me!"

"My career!" he retorted bitterly. "What is my career worth in comparison with you? You take an altogether morbid view of the matter. These things are forgotten in six months; and in any case the whole mystery will probably be cleared up before long."

"When it is, come to me and say again what you have said today—if you have not changed your mind."

"And then?" he whispered eagerly.

"I will tell you what I think about it," said Edith, with a tantalizing smile. They were almost at the Hall now, and by sheer force of the joy in her heart, she gave rein to her innate coquetry.

"Good-by!" she cried, holding out her hand.

Lester looked dangerous, but she frowned and stamped her little foot, and he, losing courage, dared only to press his lips to her glove. He turned away dejectedly, and Edith looked after him with something of surprise. Had she driven him away from her, this knight errant who had found her in the wilderness? Then she ran back toward him, her cheeks aglow.

"Shut your eyes," she commanded imperiously, "and don't dare to move!"

Lester obeyed, in sheer astonishment. He felt a delicious touch, light as thistledown, on his lips, and awoke to find himself alone, alone in a smiling world which had suddenly changed into a Paradise.

CHAPTER XIV.

Bradshaw Takes Hobson in Hand.

William L. Bradshaw had made a friend of the detective. He had, indeed, made a friend of every person with whom he came in contact, being gifted with a calmly persuasive manner which inspired confidence in all men, not to mention women. A reckless prodigality in the manner of half-crowns, too, caused the villagers to imagine that the millenium, was imminent, if not already in their midst. So far as Hobson was concerned, he took special pains to establish good relations, because he saw that the detective was endowed with infinite capabilities, though wrapped in the red-tape of Scotland Yard.

The American was deeply interested in the mysteries of Lord Arncliffe's death. The sentimental aspect appealed little to him, since he had never set eyes on his relative. But it was clear that influences had been at work which had caused great injury to his own personal prospects. Lord Arncliffe would certainly have taken the claims of so near a relative into consideration in disposing of his wealth, had not the fact of the existence of a nephew been kept from him.

It was impossible to avoid the doubt that Edith might have been responsible, at least for the suppression of Bradshaw's letters. Yet, from the first, the hard-headed American had resolutely refused to regard her as guilty in the smallest degree. There was a mystery, and that mystery he intended to solve. In all his friendly visits to the Hall he had kept his eyes open for the slightest clue tending to throw light upon the subject. The first thing essential was to win the trust of the detective, and now he had so far succeeded that the inspector was installed in his private sitting-room at the "Fisherman's Rest," ready to discuss developments and to impart his latest theories.

The quaint old room, with its carved wainscoting and its time-ensabled beams, exercised a restful influence over the nervous American. After he had pushed a tray laden with whiskey and cigars—cigars which were real Havanas and not doped imitations—across the table to the detective, he sat for a long time silently meditative, with something of that red-Indian imperturbability which seems to be the natural inheritance of men born in the great new land.

Hobson was quiet too. He was not a waster of words, nor was it part of his policy to hurry man's thoughts. At length Bradshaw took his cigar from between his lips.

"Partner," he said, "you are weeping over the wrong grave."

The other looked at him with an expression of blank inquiry.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Bradshaw, testily, "can't you understand plain language? You are barking up the wrong tree."

"What the dickens do you mean?" asked Hobson, still only half comprehending.

"Well, now, you are wasting your time trying to fasten things on to that poor little girl, Edith Holt, when you know she is the last person in the world to have committed so cold-blooded a crime. There is the business of that check for three hundred pounds she says the old man gave her—"

"I withdraw that," interrupted Hobson hastily. "I have every reason now to believe that Lord Arncliffe did give her the money. But there is something inexplicable in connection with those letters of yours. It is all very well for the young lady to say she never had the least idea of inheriting Lord Arncliffe's money; but let us suppose, for the sake of our inquiry, that she did know the terms of his will. She, or some one acting in her behalf, might very well decide to put him away before your arrival on the scene caused him to change his mind. Probably he would have treated her handsomely in any case; yet I do not think there can be much doubt you would have been the heir instead of Miss Holt."

"Neither do I," agreed Bradshaw, "but that does not prove Miss Holt to be a fraud. There is something in that girl's face—"

"I know," smirked Hobson, with an insufferable wink. "She is a perfect little angel to look at, and her soul is mirrored in her eyes. Bless you! I know ladies who are doing their 'ten years penal' at this moment who could give Miss Holt points—"

"Sometimes you talk like a perfect idiot," broke in Bradshaw, speaking with icy deliberation. "You British policemen are not taught anything, except the regulation of traffic. You do that well enough, I'll admit, but when it comes to a delicate case like this you are not in the same category as the French detectives, or, as far as that goes, the American. Why, man alive, a New York headquarters sleuth would have discovered the murderer a week ago; and, unless he coughed up handsomely, would have delivered him in the inexorable clutches of the law, there to be held until the jury disagreed on the twenty-first appeal, and most all the interested parties were dead."

"That is all very pretty, Mr. Bradshaw," was the self-sufficient reply; "but if you come down to real results, I think you will find that English detectives score more successes in the long run than all your Frenchmen or Americans put together. If we find a woman with her head cut off, we don't look up the antecedents of the two-year old baby, simply because he is the most unlikely person to have committed the crime. As a rule, the most likely person is the person, and anyway, I am not such a 'perfect idiot' as to allow myself to be thrown off the scent by the simpering of a pretty face."

"Say," exclaimed the American in accents of deepest disgust, "you give me a pain in the neck. I have met poisonously bad women with pretty faces, but they have not taken in any man worth a cent. You want to read up Lombroso, my friend—you should study criminology in its physiological and physiognomical aspects. Show me that Miss Holt's head is too flat her eyes too close together, that her ears are pointed, that the angle of her jaw is too wide or too narrow—show me even that her mouth is too large or too small—confound you—and I will say: 'Let us by all means watch Miss Edith Holt.'"

"I must admit that she is an uncommonly fine girl," growled Hobson. "And I don't mind the further admission to you, sir, that I am not quite so sure as I was even about her complicity in the affair. As I told you, I am quite satisfied regarding the three hundred pounds. And I am pretty well certain, too, that she had nothing to do with the attack on Aingier. At the same time, there is something very queer about it all, and more than once I have been near arresting her upon her own responsibility."

"And a pretty pickle you would be in when she was proved innocent."

"I know that," and the detective's instant candor revealed his deadly earnestness. "That is what held me back. It would have been a grand feather in my cap to convict a woman with forty thousand a year, but if I had failed there would have been an end to the career of yours truly. Still, you see I must make some move. It does not redound to my credit that the murder of a man like Lord Arncliffe should remain a mystery, and if I don't clear it up the authorities will supersede me for a certainty."

"There was not any money stolen when Aingier was attacked!" asked the American, irrelevantly.

"Not a halfpenny, so far as we can make out. The only thing missing was an account book, on which he was working. And—there you are again—Miss Holt knew all about Lord Arncliffe's accounts. If there was anything wrong, it is only reasonable to suppose her to be the person most interested in suppressing the tell-tale figures."

"Well," continued Bradshaw, still apparently without reference to the subject under discussion, "I have been spending quite a lot of my time lately in the bar down-stairs. I did not mean the parlor, but right among all the horny-handed sons of toil who some here to measure their wages against Jones's beer. They are quite an interesting lot of men and remarkably fond of strong drink."

"So they are, but I don't think you will pick up much information from those yokels."

"Perhaps not. Anyhow, a chap they call Leigh, a sort of poacher and never work, seems to have struck it pretty rich lately. The old landlord tells me that this fellow used not to have two cents to rub together, and was always cadging from some one or other. Now he has taken to setting up drinks for the crowd and changing gold right and left."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hobson, with a nod of comprehension. Here was a situation which came within his province. "We will just keep an eye on this gentleman who has become rich so suddenly. I can see, sir, you have got the makings of a first-class detective in you. Of course, it would be easy enough for the young lady to bribe a fellow like that to do any sort of crooked work."

"Why in thunder can't you leave the young lady out of your calculations?" cried Bradshaw with renewed impatience. "If she is guilty, you can lay your hands on her when the proper time comes. Judging by the way you are going on, you will end by letting the real murderer slip through your fingers."

"I suppose I shall have to telegraph to the Yard for another man," said Hobson, ruefully. "I hate to do it. You get a case like this all cut and dried, with only one little thing lacking to make the chain of evidence complete. And then a new man comes along, hits on the clue by accident, and takes all the credit while you have done all the work."

"Still, you have the local policeman to help, haven't you?"

"Don't talk to me about the local policeman!" exclaimed the Scotland Yard official, in tones of intense disgust. "Fox is his name; it ought to have been Goose. The night Aingier was attacked I found some splendid footprints on the soft ground outside the study window, and I set Fox to keep guard over them until I could take a proper cast. It appears that Fox had heard of taking a cast too—read it in 'Sherlock Holmes' or somewhere—and when I returned I found he had saved me the trouble. He sent for some plaster of Paris, he did, and poured it, thin as pea-soup, all over the ground. Of course, when you are dealing with soft dry ground you must oil it very carefully before doing anything else—and the result was that the impressions Mr. Fox got might have been made by anything from Man Friday to an elephant. No, sir; the less we have to do with P. C. Fox the better."

"See here," said Bradshaw, "I have nothing particular to occupy me just at present, and I fancy I would like to take a hand in the game myself. Supposing I were to take care of this "got-rich-quick' gentleman?"

"Well, sir," said Hobson, doubtfully, "it is rather against the rules of the force to have anything to do with amateurs, but as a special favor to you—"

"Oh, come off the fence, and don't talk that kind of nonsense to me!" interrupted Bradshaw. "So far as I can gauge the the situation you want to secure all the credit for this business and any dollars attached to it—and you don't care tuppence who gets hanged in the process. Anyway, the thing interests me, and I am going to see it through. And, believe me, Hobson, I am not worrying any whether it is according to the rules of the force or not. Have another drink?"

The whiskey was good, and the quietly expressed determination of Bradshaw unanswerable, so Hobson helped himself discreetly and awaited the developments which he fancied lay behind this offer of help.

It appeared strange that a detective of his standing at Scotland Yard—for he was unquestionably regarded as the star man of the Criminal Investigation Department—should discuss things so freely with a comparative stranger. But the American had quietly intimated to him that he was prepared to hand over a handsome reward—without any undesirable publicity and entirely apart from Lord Arncliffe's strange bequest—should Hobson succeed in securing the conviction of Lord Arncliffe's murderer. The police regulations abound with vexatious restrictions in the matter of fees, or personal remuneration, and five hundred pounds passing as a mere private matter between gentlemen was a sum of money not to be thrust aside with lofty indifference.

Bradshaw did not give any further opening, so Hobson resumed the conversation.

"There is another point," he said, "which requires a good deal of explanation. This Dr. Lester, who headed the scientific expedition to West Africa by Lord Arncliffe, arrives here on a fishing excursion. By some extraordinary lack of knowledge he was not aware that his patron lived in the neighborhood. We may note, in passing, that Dr. Lester is a very eminent authority on poisons. Now, on the very day of Lord Arncliffe's death, Dr. Lester and Miss Holt are admittedly found together by young Warren. They pretend to be strangers, and tell some cock-and-bull story about an otter and a trout."

"Did you say you were Irish?" asked Bradshaw suddenly, with a disconcerting smile.

"Well, sir, you know what I mean. Who is to say that Miss Holt and the doctor were really strangers—that they were not, as a matter of fact, old lovers? I have had my eyes pretty wide open, as you may imagine, and if those two are not sweet on each other, I will eat my hat."

"That may or may not betrue," said the American, shortly. Somehow, the suggestion of an understanding between Edith and George Lester was not particularly pleasing to him. "Anyway, Dr. Lester is a sure-enough white man, and everybody knows that he has only just returned from the Ashantee swamps. If that is the best you can do, go and place your head under the pump in the yard, my good Hobson."

"All very well," returned the detective, somewhat ruffled at last by the repeated aspersions on his intellectual capacity. "It is not impossible, nevertheless, that the meeting by the trout stream was not the first one. If it was, they have gone ahead with remarkable rapidity. Young Warren says—"

"Did it ever strike you to devote a little more attention to Mr. Harry Warren?" interrupted Bradshaw. "There is something very queer about that interesting person."

"Oh, nonsense, sir!" cried Hobson. He is the sort of man you will find by the hundred in the rural districts of England—not overburdened with brains, and with a little of the atmosphere of the stable about him. But he is not of the type which makes a cunning murderer."

"I know all about the type," Bradshaw assured him. "I have read about them. They always break their necks riding to hounds. But what I have particularly noticed is that Mr. Warren has taken up a special branch of toxicology. I will bet you any reasonable sum that he is in the parlor down-stairs right now, experimenting on himself with brandy high-balls—'B-and-S,' I think you call them. Now, I don't know how long Mr. Warren has been making himself a martyr to science, but I am willing to swear he has not been going his present gait for much more than a week or two, because there is no man living who could stand it."

"I am afraid it is not a habit of which he has the monopoly," was Hobson's reply.

"Hobson, I do believe that a week's steady talk with you would do me a world of good. It would clear my ideas. What I am trying to say is that there is something strange in the coincidence of Warren's sudden outbreak of intemperance following so closely on the beginning of all those troubles at the Hall. I have made considerable inquiries in a quiet way, and I hear that although he was not, perhaps, exactly a temperate man, yet there was nothing marked in his dissipation until the last few weeks. I do not know how it strikes you, but it appears to me to be a toss-up between an uneasy conscience and a coward's attempt to gain courage. Keep an eye on Warren! It may be helpful."

CHAPTER XV.

Bradshaw Has an Adventure.

There was a knock at the door, and Lester entered. He and Bradshaw had been thrown together a good deal. Staying, as they did, at the same inn, they met frequently, and each man recognized qualities in the other which tended to establish confidence and friendship.

"Poison yourself," was the American's welcome as he pushed the whiskey decanter toward his new visitor.

Hobson, unaware that Lester was acquainted with his theft of Edith's second letter, looked up at the young doctor with an ingratiating smile of one who would have bygones be bygones. He was quickly undeceived.

"Well," said Lester, addressing him with scant courtesy, "may I ask if you have posted that other letter of Miss Holt's, or have you appropriated to your own use the draft contained in it?"

For once, Hobson's inscrutable countenance betrayed emotion. He went deathly pale, and the excuse that was trembling on his lips gave place to the truthfulness of honest indignation. "I don't think I have deserved that," he said with something of natural dignity. "Miss Holt's letter, with the money it held, has been posted safely enough, and I am bound to say, in justice to the young lady, that what she wrote clears her at least from one suspicion. Now, sir, technically I have committed a crime which might have grave consequences for me. Though you really have no evidence against me, I am not going to attempt any concealment. I have have only taken reasonable measures to unravel a mysterious murder, and I am willing to put it to Mr. Bradshaw, here, whether in the interests of justice I did not act rightly."

"Why, say," remarked Bradshaw, "I don't know a thing about the matter yet. You say you have committed a crime. I am open to believe that about anybody. Don't be discouraged, Hobson. At your age, it can't be the first crime you have committed. And I am dead sure it won't be the last."

The answer came from Lester, who found the American's lazy cynicism a little jarring. "Inspector Hobson's crime is this," he said curtly: "he has been tampering with the post-office in order to get hold of Miss Holt's private correspondence."

"I don't think we ought to blame him for that," said Bradshaw, dispassionately. "A man does not become a detective, anyway, unless he has the instincts of a horse thief. Sit down, Hobson," he went on, as the official, really hurt, half rose. "I don't mean that as personal—in fact, I am trying to justify you. See here, Dr. Lester, if you face things fairly and squarely, you must realize that no detective work is possible without what you and I call underhand methods. After all, nothing of the sort will injure an innocent person in the long run; and your British police have the reputation of being reasonably honest, though," he admitted, when Hobson's countenance cleared a little, "I am not much of a believer in miracles myself. Look cheerful, Hobson, and have another drink. Dr. Lester is going to forgive you."

William Lincoln Bradshaw suggested the consumption of alcohol with appalling frequency, but as his own habit was to take rather less than a teaspoonful on each occasion, he, at least, suffered no ill effects from his pressing hospitality.

"I want no forgiveness from anybody," said the detective, sulkily. "I am only doing my duty. Miss Holt may be as innocent as you or I, but you can't dispute that Lord Arncliffe was murdered. Mr. Aingier nearly murdered, and possibly other crimes committed which these more serious ones were meant to cloak. I don't profess to be a Sherlock Holmes. My system is to give my attention to the person who benefits from a crime. And I have never drawn blank yet."

"Well, now," said Bradshaw to Lester, "it was just telling this unerring sleuth-hound of some peculiarities which had struck me in the conduct of that blatant Britisher, Warren. Don't wink the nap of your eyelide at me, friend Hobson. Just at present I propose to make my calculations on the basis that Dr. Lester is a square man, and if you don't like it you can do the other thing, for the proposition is my own. Now, Lester, I have also been telling our friend here about that poacher fellow whose extraordinary access of wealth we have both noticed. And I have further drawn his attention to the fact that Harry Warren is drinking a great deal more than any one takes out of mere devotion to liquor. He gives one the impression of a man so harassed that he is endeavoring all the time to escape from his own vicinity. I am inclined to attribute all this to the workings of a troublesome imp called conscience, which we read about in fairy tales. I have also made some considerable study of Arncliffe Hall lately, and I notice there is a light in one of the rooms half through the night—conscience again. People who live in a Sleepy Hollow like this go to bed early, in the hope of dreaming they are alive. If we could take a peep into that room we might see something to enlighten us."

"What room is it?" asked Hobson.

"The room just over the library, where old Aingier got soaked on the cabeza."

Bradshaw had spent his early days amid that delightful society which infests the valley of the Rio Grande. When talking of deeds of violence, he had a habit of introducing, here and there, a word of Spanish, which is, after all, the natural language of assassination.

"Oh, but it's no good bothering about that," protested the detective. "That is simply the private sitting-room of Mrs. Warren, the housekeeper."

"So I supposed. But what special cares has Mrs. Warren to keep her up so late? I first noticed this burning of the midnight oil on the night of the attack on Aingier. As you know, Dr. Lester, I waited until you decided that your patient was out of immediate danger; and then we came back here together, nearly at daylight. It was reasonable enough that Mrs. Warren should remain awake on that occasion, and I should have thought nothing further of the matter, had not the same thing been repeated night after night. I watched round about the Hall—partly because this business had interested me, and partly because I have been doing a little detective business on my own account. I surmise this much—that Mrs. Warren waits up to talk with this hopeful son of hers. And I am inclined to think that a little knowledge of the situation on our part would produce quite a lot of information."

"I don't like spying," objected Lester, a note of decision in his voice.

"Neither do I," retorted Bradshaw, "but I should like still less for that winsome young girl to be charged with murder, as Hobson proposes. Anyway, it is not your funeral. I am only telling you a plan of my own."

"If there is anything I can do to help Miss Holt," began Lester, eagerly.

"Ah, you see that side of it, do you? If you really want to do violence to your high-toned feelings, you might just go and mix some liquor with the wealthy gentleman they call Leigh, and shadow him home, too. I wouldn't be at all surprised if that skunk Warren dropped into the game before you are through."

Bradshaw looked at his watch. "Half past ten," he continued. "You have half an hour in which to cultivate Mr. Robert Leigh. Now go away, boy, and leave Hobson and myself to elaborate our low-down plans."

Lester, half offended, yet conscious that Bradshaw was in the right, went down-stairs. He returned, offered to help the others, but was sent to bed.

Bradshaw and the detective, taciturn men by nature but rendered talkative by necessity to hide their thoughts, remained silent for a long time, considering the position. There was really little to go upon. A light in a window at an unusual hour might have a dozen adequate explanations. The mere events which had happened at the Hall were enough to account for the sleeplessness of an elderly woman to whom Arncliffe Hall had practically represented the world for so many years.

But Hobson, finding himself at a loss, was ready to follow the slightest clue. Bradshaw, like Lester, had declined from the beginning to admit even the possibility of Edith's guilt; but he realized nevertheless that there was negative evidence in existence against her which, though it might not place her life in peril, yet might embitter in irrevocably. And, as far as lay in his power, he resolved to save her.

"I have been studying the geography pretty carefully," he explained to his companion when the lighting of a new cigar aroused him from a reverie. "There is a tree which looks conveniently into that window. A boy who is accustomed to birds' nesting might fix himself up comfortably."

"Perhaps," interrupted Hobson, acidly, "you could suggest something suitable to a man of forty-five who suffers from rheumatism?"

"I haven't any rheumatism," replied the American, cheerfuly, "and I guess I can climb that tree. I will tell you a fairy tale about what I see afterward. Things ought to be reasonably quiet at the Hall about eleven; and if we reach there half an hour later, that will do. Smoke!" and he handed over a Havana from his waistcoat pocket, "but don't talk to me; I want to figure things some more."

And so they sat again in silence, until presently Bradshaw looked at his watch and closed it with a snap.

"Ten past eleven," he said. "Twenty minutes' walk to the Hall. Come along partner, we had better make a move."

They went down-stairs. "Jolly Jim" Jones was just clearing away the empty tankards of his village customers.

"Going out to breathe for a while, boss," said Bradshaw. "Don't worry about me; I have my key."

"All right, sir. You won't take a drop of my special to keep the cold out before you go?"

"No, thank you, I have people dependent on me in the United States. Good night."

The country lane was utterly deserted. It was silent enough to ears not tuned to the myriad voices of the night—the chirp of the cricket, the rustling of a dry leaf as an errant breeze stirred it, the trembling of a branch touched by a weazel gliding forth on foray, the sudden soft whir of wings as an owl swept down on its prey, the stirring of the undergrowth in the Park by the unseen animals, which abounded in its fastnesses.

And so the two advanced, as noiselessly as possibly, until there came a fitful gleam between the trees. It was the light for which they had come to look; the light which had shone night after night—telling what story? Perhaps only the story of a mother's anguish—the anguish of a mother whose son was coming home with dimmed eyes and faltering steps. All this Bradshaw thought of, but he thought of Edith Holt too, and went on.

A short cut through the woods and they found themselves beneath the lighted window. There was an oak which spread its branches close to the room, thirty feet below. Without a needless word, Bradshaw drew his companion close to the trunk and climbed upon his shoulders to reach the first stout limb of the tree.

Once within the boughs, the American climbed up like any school boy, and settled himself on the branch nearest to the window, perching precariously at the extreme limit of safety. He found that the window was closed, therefore nothing could be heard, yet the scene within the room offered ample material for speculation when he came to ponder on it afterwards.

Harry Warren, looking utterly cowed, was sitting in an arm-chair, while his mother stormed up and down the room like a very fury. There was, through all her anger, the repression characteristic of the woman. It was no exaggeration to say that she stormed, yet her voice was never raised; strain his ears as he might, Bradshaw could hear no syllable of the conversation. He waited until he grew cramped and until Hobson beneath was hoarsely impatient, and still Mrs. Warren talked with fiery animation, but always, it seemed, with her natural restraint.

Then, at last, she quitted the room. Her son, who had sat dejected and nervous during the harangue, jumped up alertly. He pulled open drawer after drawer of the desk and searched them so frantically, with such bungling haste, that he did not notice his mother's return. She entered, with a certain stealth and stood behind him, impassive as ever. Warren apparently found what he