By Gordon Holmes

# THE ARNCLIFFE PUZZLE

Author of A Mysterious Disappearance

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

"Lies right behind you, sir." Still that galling note of irony.

"How stupid of me! That way, you say? Thanks; good night!"

Hobson turned and walked away with as much dignity as he could command, not sure, even now, that he was entirely safe from that "crack on the head." The blow, indeed, might be met, for he was not the man to shirk a tussle, but the insolent chuckle which the poacher sent after him was gall and wormwood. He, one of the smartest of all the smart men at "The Yard," to be outwitted and jeered at by a mere yokel! However, it was clear that on his own ground the yokel was more than a match for the Londoner, and the Londoner was sufficiently candid to acknowledge it.

Of Lester, on the other hand, the poacher had no mistrust. He had been drawn to the young doctor from their first meeting in the bar of the "Fisherman's Rest," when he told Lester of that giant trout which came to so untimely an end. A man who dealt with the ever-burning question of beer in so liberal a spirit could not but inspire friendship, and Lester had shown sufficient acquaintance with the coy secrets of the woods and streams to command Leigh's respect.

As a matter of fact, Lester liked the old ruffian, but Hobson so pressed upon him the importance of ascertaining how a man in Leigh's position could be continually changing sovereigns, that, for Edith's sake, he undertook to find out, if possible, whether Leigh was in any way concerned in the recent happenings at Arncliffe Hall.

For a day of two the poacher had been rather less sedulous in his attentions to the home-brewed of Landlord Jones, and the reason was apparent when one afternoon he accosted Lester, who was taking a solitary ramble.

"All the folks around here say that you're a great doctor, sir, a much better man than Dr. Smalley," he said in uneasy compliment. "I've been wondering if you would come and have a look at my old mother. I'd be mortal glad, sir, and I'd pay anything you like to ask."

"My good fellow," replied Lester, "I am a specialist, and in most cases you would do far better to consult Dr. Smalley. Still, I will see your mother with pleasure. As for payment, I am on a holiday, and I refuse to work, save in a friendly way, for anybody."

"Thankee, sir." For the first time Lester saw something approaching emotion in the rugged sinister face of the poacher.

"What is the matter with your mother?"

"Well, sir, she's took to her bed a bit earlier than usual of late, and this mornin' she was very quit—lay still and followed me about with her eyes without saying a word. Nor she don't care for her cup o' tea or her pipe o' 'bacca as she used to."

"Is she very old?"

"Why, doctor, she might be ninety, or she might be a little more, but she's allus been strong."

"You see," said Lester, gently, "when people reach ninety years of age you must expect all sorts of ailments, and you must be prepared for the worst. At the same time, it is quite possible that with a little care she will be all right again for some time to come. Would you like me to see her now?"

"If you would be so kind, sir."

They strolled on to the little hovel on the outskirts, where Warren, half mad with fear, had removed the stains of his attack on the solicitor. Lester, on entering, recoiled with disgust from the horrible atmosphere—an atmosphere which brought vivid recollections of African Kraals.

"Good Heavens, man!" he exclaimed, "no wonder your mother is ill! Why, this air is enough to poison her!"

"Oh, it's the way she's lived all her life. You mustn't judge us folk the same as you would the gentry."

"I know; but—here, won't this window open? Then keep the door wide, for goodness' sake, or I shall be stifled."

The atmosphere cleared a little, and Lester turned his attention to the old woman lying on the heap of foul rags which served as a bed. He saw at once that she was verging on delirium. There was a vacant uneasiness in her eyes, and she moved her skinny hands about restlessly. She was going to die presently.

"Is that Maister Harry Warren?" she asked, peering through the gloom at Lester. "I've got the books safe enough, Maister Warren, I've got 'em safe enough."

"Shut up, mother!" growled the son, savagely. "This is the doctor come to see you. I'm afraid, sir," he explained apologetically to Lester, "she's a bit off her head."

"Oh, no, it isn't the doctor. I may be old, Bob, but I'm not blind yet. It's Harry Warren—Warren that got you six months, Warren that tried to murder the old lawyer, Warren that we're mindin' the books for, Warren—why," screamed the aged crone, sitting up and tossing away the white locks from her eyes, "there he is now looking over your shoulder!"

The two men turned involuntarily toward the door as she made her vehement assertion, and both started with astonishment. For there, in very truth, stood Harry Warren, his lips white with fear and his red face haggard.

CHAPTER XIX.

Wherein Lester is Caged.

Warren's burly frame, rigid as a statue, blocked up the doorway. For a moment Lester and the poacher, watchful and immobile, gazed at him. Then the young agent stepped forward and closed the door with a bang. He had the truculent air of one who challenged the right of way.

Lester, to whom danger was no new thing, took in the position at a glance. He stood quietly, only clenching and unclenching his hands with the unconscious movement of the athlete who is presently going to put forth all his strength. He looked toward Leigh inquiringly, but the poacher's eyes were dropped in sullen inability to deal with a difficult situation. So Lester squared back his shoulders, seemingly paying heed to neither man, but really suspicious of both.

"Maister Harry Warren!" cackled the old woman again.

"Shut up, mother!" Leigh's hand was raised now, with the action of the coster who threatens a blow without meaning it.

"Off her head, sir," he explained to Lester again.

"I will send you some medicine for her," replied Lester, calmly professional. "Meanwhile, keep her quiet and try to improve the ventilation a little."

He made to walk toward the door, with seeming indifference, and, though he knew it was coming, the clutch of Leigh on his arm sent something of a chill through him.

"Is there anything else you want to ask me?" he asked suavely.

Warren was looking on with white-hot eyes.

"Oh, good God, Leigh," he broke out, "we can't let him go!"

"Who will stop me?" he asked, with the tense note in his voice of the man who will if needs be. The agent did not answer. He had already tasted something of the young doctor's methods. Although he did not lack brute courage, previous experience counseled prudence.

"Well now, Maister Lester," began the poacher, "you see—"

"I see that there is something I am going to investigate," interrupted Lester, sternly. "I don't know how far you are concerned in it, but if you take my advice you will refuse to be concerned any further. And now open that door, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Oh, come, sir," growled Leigh, with some of that crude irony which had so galled Hobson. "You mustn't give your orders as though we were a lot of servants. If you come here as the friend of Romany people, you must do as they tell you."

"You are not telling the truth," interjected Lester sharply. "I came here at your request to do you a service; and you are now acting like a treacherous cur. Don't think that you and your fellow dog there can hold me. I am quite man enough to deal with two pariahs of your type."

Lester's withering glance made Leigh draw back—the shrinking of brawn from blood—and Lester strode to the door. There stood Harry Warren, still barring the way, and Lester, with old contempt and reawakened antipathy, put up a scornful hand.

"Let me pass," he said curtly, and then, as Warren did not move: "Get out of my way, you fool. You cannot hinder me!"

For an instant he glowed with the instincts of the primeval savage. Warren, not deficient in pluck, leaped warily to meet him and parried a glancing blow which took a square quarter of an inch from one of his eyebrows. Lester drew back and gathered himself to hit again. He had forgotten all about possible interference by the gypsy, and it came to him as a shock when he found his next effort restrained by a grip which might have belonged to the grizzly bear of Bradshaw's imagination.

The poacher flung him into a corner as though he were a baby, and Lester lay gasping for a minute. Then he sprang up, indomitable as ever, and ready to face two enemies where he had expected only one. He saw the horrible odds against him; the poacher, a comparatively old man, but strong as Samson, strong, that is, in a confined space, where one came within his grip, and Warren too, with the bull-like strength of the young countryman—a strength to be met by an alert man and a brave man, but not in the narrow limits of a hovel which did not permit of six feet of free movement from end to end.

"You hound!" shouted Lester, turning to Leigh and grinding his teeth, "you hound! You asked me to your house to attend your mother who was ill. You make me your guest. And now you treat me like this. I have lived long enough in the world to mistrust everybody, but this is the first time I have encountered a wretch of your sort. I did not think you would trade on your mother's illness to betray me!"

The gypsy took a step toward Lester. "Don't tempt me, don't tempt me!" he cried hoarsely. "I am friendly toward you, but I won't take insult from any man."

"Won't you?" said Lester, his back to the wall again; and he faced the two men—one a towering figure, sullen but determined, and the other, malevolent, half crouching to spring upon him. Won't you? Then open your door and move that oaf from in front of it."

Lester stepped forward, but the bear's hug of the old poacher was around him. He struggled desperately but ineffectively. There was no room. Nevertheless, he forced Leigh close to the bed on which the old woman lay dying. And then Warren stepped forward and hit him a crushing blow behind the ear.

Lester dropped, and lay a limp bundle between his two assailants. Leigh sprang upright, his great hand gripping deep into Warren's shoulder.

"I won't have him hurt," he vociferated.

"You fool!" snarled Warren, contemptuously, can't you see that he will ruin us?"

"Ruin you!" retorted the poacher. "He can't ruin me."

"Can't he?" retorted Warren, ferociously. "What do you suppose people will think? They will say, if it comes to the worst for me, that I hired you to attack old Aingier, and you can't turn King's evidence against me on that. What are we to do with the body?"—and he kicked the prostrate figure.

"No, no!" exclaimed Leigh with an oath. "I'll do no murder on your account."

Warren straightened himself. "Look here," he said, "this is not a game of cricket. You and I are both likely to get into a mess over it. You have secured the books which can injure me, but if I choose to do so I can easily make you responsible for the assault on Aingier, however much I may suffer personally. You are going to have your thousand pounds in a week or so, and if this interfering brute," pushing Lester's prostrate body with his foot again, "were to disappear for good, there is nobody to bring it against us."

"I won't have it," said Leigh, obstinately. "He's been a real gentleman to me, and I have acted toward him like a dirty skunk."

"Well, what other course is open? Are you going to wait for that meddlesome police inspector to come down and arrest both of us? Think, man, think! Don't you see that this doctor who came here from nowhere must be put out of the way?"

During this conversation, Lester lay huddled on the floor where he had fallen, while the old crone on the bed muttered childishly that they were "makin' a rare to-do about them books."

"I am not a murderer, Maister Warren," went on Leigh, doggedly," but I want that thousand pounds from you, and when you give it to me you can have the books and go your own road. Still, I can see we must keep the doctor quiet, and I know where to keep him quiet if only we were to get him there. There is the empty shooting box at Foxgill—"

Warren knew now that all his raving would not move Leigh. So, perforce, he fell in with the half-suggested plan.

"There is my dog-cart down the road," he said, "and we can reach Foxgill in less than an hour. Guarantee to keep him quiet. Once the books are destroyed, he can say what he likes. It is only his word against mine."

Leigh gave a gruff assent. They wasted no further time in discussion, but hoisted Lester, still insensible from Warren's cowardly blow, into the dog-cart and covered him over with the kneecloth. The hour was late, and the shadows were deepening. Nevertheless, though they were not likely to meet many wayfarers on the road they followed, it was desirable, from their point of view, that they should get clear of the outskirts of the village as soon as possible.

Aingier had complained of Warren's reckless driving, bue had he been in the trap on this occasion he would probably have turned grey for the second time in his life. Warren lashed the mare until she tore along with a suggestion of panic in her action; but the agent was a splendid whip, and he guided her over the rough road with rare skill.

Onward he urged her for a good five miles, and then he turned on to the moorland. Now over tussacks of grass; now through mole-hills, now actually among the heather, the dog-cart bumped and floundered, but always there was a steady hand on the reins, while the poacher sat beside, steading Lester's nerveless figure. The mare began to breathe painfully, and Warren perforce slackened the mad pace a little.

"Man alive," he said, for the twentieth time, "can't you realize what a menace this doctor fellow is to us?"

"Go your road, Maister Warren, and I'll go mine," retorted Leigh. "He's a real man is the doctor, and I won't have him hurt. And," he went on with sudden fury, "if you get up to any of your cursed games with him I'll make you repent it."

"My dear fellow," answered Warren, with uneasy compliance, "I don't wish to hurt him. If you keep him quiet for a week or so, that is all I want."

"Leigh relapsed into silence. Another couple of miles brought them to one of those roughly built shooting-boxes which are often the only buildings to be found amid the wastes of the northern moors. It was a small tower, roughly built of stones, found in the vicinity, and containing a few rooms sparsely furnished to accommodate the sportsmen—real sportsmen—who used it. Now, when there was no shooting, it was left without a caretaker.

"I will open a window in a moment," said Leigh, jumping down. Soon the bolts of the front door grated, and he appeared at the entrance. "Now then!" He lifted Lester in his strong arms and carried him in, followed by Warren.

Lester was regaining his senses. He moved his limbs and groaned. Opening his eyes, he looked vacantly around. Then he scrambled unsteadily to his feet, his mind clear to all that had passed up to the moment he was struck down, but in a maze because of his new surroundings. Warren, unable to meet his eye fairly, assumed an expression of sneering contempt. But Lester did not concern himself with the agent. He turned on Leigh with a fury none the less intense that it was repressed.

"Now," he said with biting scorn, "this is blackmail, of course. How much do you want?"

"Nothing from you, sir," retorted the poacher, sturdily. "But you have dropped into some business between Maister Warren and myself—business which makes you dangerous—and you must not blame us if we keep you quiet for a bit."

"If you are able," cried Lester, passionately.

There was a deal chair beside him. He picked it up and swung it in the air. But his head swam. Leigh took the chair from his hands with what might almost be called gentle courtesy.

"I think we can," said he. "Now, sir, will you promise to stop here quietly until I tell you you can go?"

"You infernal idiot!" broke in Warren.

"Leave me alone," growled the poacher. "I know a gentleman when I see one. Will you promise, doctor?"

"No, by Heaven, I will not!" cried Lester.

"Very well, sir. Then I shall have to shut you up."

Warren dragged the poacher to one side, while Lester, still half-dazed, watched them with the abstract curiosity of a man who sees arrangements being made for his own execution yet cannot appreciate the imminence of his peril.

"You are mad!" he heard Warren say peevishly. "Can't you see that he may attract attention to himself? This place is isolated, I know; but some one may pass."

"Doctor," he said, "a man must look after himself, and if you go scot-free just at present I must suffer for it. You won't promise not to escape. Will you promise to keep quiet?"

"No," answered Lester, shutting his jaws with a snap.

"Then when we leave you here, you will not only be bound, but gagged."

Lester was seething with hot rage, but he saw the determination in the gypsy's eyes, and he was quite alive to the terrible prospect of lying for hours with a gag between his teeth. It was folly to resist under the circumstances, and he was wont to make up his mind quickly.

"Very well," he said. "I will keep quiet for a couple of days, but again I warn yo uthat you will pay bitterly for this outrage."

Leigh wasted no words. "Come along; I know the house," he said to Warren. "Many is the time I have taken refuge here when your cursed gamekeepers were after me."

He led the way up to the first floor and into a tiny room entirely bare of furniture.

Lester followed quietly, with Warren at his heels. More than ever did he see the futility of resistance in his present state; therefore he made the best of the situation.

There you are, sir," continued the poacher. "They are hard quarters for a gentleman, but from what you have told me, I think you have been in harder in your time. And don't forget that I have your word, the word of a gentleman, you won't make a sound. I will bring you some food tomorrow."

The door had a heavy mortised lock. He shut and locked it with a clang which brought a sinking to Lester's heart, brave as he was. He heard the descending footsteps as Warren and Leigh went away. With a natural instinct, he went to the window and looked out. Forty feet and hard ground at the bottom! No escape that way. And then to the door. But his instrument case had been left behind in Leigh's cottage, and one cannot open a door with a watch chain or a handful of silver. These were the only available metal articles he had in his possession. And then he caught the rattle of wheels and the vicious crack of Warren's whip.

He was alone on the moor, ten miles from anywhere.

CHAPTER XX.

Bradshaw "Makes Good."

Warren's mad drive had not passed altogether unnoticed. May Mannering, with a growing appreciation of the qualities of the groom Wilson, was waiting for him in the quietest lane leading out of Arncliffe, the lane which led to Foxgill Moor. She had seen Warren go past with a companion whom she did not recognize. But her quick eye had taken in the bundle under the leather apron; and it seemed to her that there was a projecting foot which could not possibly belong to either Warren or his companion.

She had practically given up all hope of bringing Warren back to his allegiance, and the production of a bank-book showing a credit balance of close on two hundred pounds, made Wilson distinctly a persona grata. So, of course, when Wilson arrived, she told him what she had seen, and the groom, still intensely jealous of Warren, was only too delighted to put a bad construction on this incident.

"Up to some devilment, you may bet," he said, yet really thinking nothing of the matter.

Between Bradshaw and Lester the close friendship which sprang up, although they had known each other for so short a time, was in no way weakened by recent events. Next morning, when the American learned that Lester had not been in the inn all night, he was genuinely disturbed. His first idea was that the young doctor had returned to London, but the presence of Lester's luggage, supplemented by an inquiry at the local station, effectually disposed of that theory. The individual who combined with himself the post of booking clerk, ticket collector, and station master at Arncliffe said emphatically that Lester had not been near the station the past three days. Obviously, he must have gone to the Hall and stayed there. To the Hall Bradshaw went without any delay.

In the grounds he met Phyllis Harland, who, indeed, expected him, and who had arranged a special curl on her forehead for his benefit.

Miss Harland knew perfectly well that he would arrive early. She had made a gratifying conquest in a record time, and the only thing which troubled her was a "nasty, mean, unfair" habit, to use her own adjectives, the American had of making her do as he told her. She was always planning how she would bring him to his knees, but somehow, her plans just failed. He knelt metaphorically, and pleaded as nicely as she could wish; nevertheless, his plea always seemed a command. It was intolerable.

Poor Phyllis had tried demureness, sauciness, and trustful dependence, without attaining that tyrannical ascendency over him which she wished to establish. Now, as a last desperate resort, she tried being natural.

"How are you, Mr. Bradshaw?" she said, holding out one hand and looking at him with frank, honest eyes.

"I am very well," said Bradshaw, "but at the same time worried. Dr. Lester has disappeared mysteriously, and this neighborhood appears to be so unhealthy that I am rather afraid he may have struck trouble of some sort."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Phyllis. "Poor Edith!"

"Poor Edith?" cried Bradshaw, curiously.

With true masculine density, he had not realized that there was any sort of tender feeling in existence between his friend and the young mistress of Arncliffe.

"How silly men are! And I think you are the silliest of all of them."

"Well, but—" began Bradshaw, rather ruffled.

"Silly, silly, silly! Come and tell dear Edith about Dr. Lester. I am sure the news will nearly kill the poor girl."

"Well," said Bradshaw again, mildly. "Why should it kill the poor girl?"

"Oh!"—Phyllis was out of patience—"if ever I have charge of you—" she stopped in utter confusion, and made what Bradshaw would have called a "bee line" to the Hall.

The American, alternating between effulgent joy and intense gloom, walked at her side. He was wondering whether Edith would relent and accept his proposal. Had it not been for that now appalling possibility, he was capable of prostrating himself at the feet of Miss Phyllis then and there, although he had known her only three days—and, be it confessed, Miss Phyllis was entirely capable of accepting him. She had met what she urgently needed, a man, of whom she was afraid.

Edith, sunning herself on the balcony, gave them a smiling welcome, delighted, though, it may be, a trifle surprised, to see the pair such good friends. "Well, young people," she called out brightly.

Phyllis was full of her news. She adored Edith, but there was a breathless joy in telling of Lester's disappearance which overcame all other considerations. She arrested Bradshaw with an imperious gesture. "Stop there!" she said. Then, rushing to her friend and clasping her in her arms, she poured forth a narrative from which little was to be gathered save that some calamity had befallen Lester.

Edith stiffened and drooped her head. The situation justified a fainting fit; but she was not the fainting type of woman, though she had fainted once at the inquest under deep stress. Besides, there was Bradshaw looking on.

"My dear girl," she cried with a forced alugh. "Dr. Lester is not a child. You must not think that because there have been two extraordinary incidents here, the place is abounding in murderers and brigands."

Yet she had become exceedingly pale, and her mouth was awry with what she meant to be a smile of indifference.

"Of course," said Bradshaw, coming to the rescue. "Lester's all right. So far as I could judge him, he is a man who could easily lick his weight in wildcats. At the same time, I'd feel pretty good if he'd put in an appearance."

"Don't let us worry ourselves about Dr. Lester," repeated Edith. "He is, I am sure, quite capable of taking care of himself. If you will come in, Phyllis, I will give you some of the loveliest chocolates you have ever tasted."

Bradshaw, slightly surprised by her seeming flippancy, strolled away with with Phyllis toward a flight of steps leading to the verandah. But, when they had reached the top, Edith had left the garden to see Wilson, who had sent an earnest request for an interview.

Edith was beloved and respected by all the servants—respected all the more because, whether as Lord Arncliffe's paid secretary or as the mistress of Arncliffe Hall, she had always treated them with the same unfailing and kindly dignity.

"Well, Wilson?" she asked, as the groom stood twirling his cap uneasily in his hand. "What is it?"

"Why, miss, I—I—of course it may be nothing, but I thought it my duty to tell you. I heard down at the inn that Dr. Lester has not been there all night, and something has come to my knowledge which makes me think it possible the gentleman has met foul play."

"Yes," said Edith, wondering what there could be behind all this mystery, "yes, go on!"

"Well, miss, there's a young lady I—I am keeping company with, and last night she saw Master Harry driving like mad with some one in the gig. There seemed to be a sort of bundle under the apron, and she's pretty sure that here was a foot sticking out at the side of the trap. I know it's not my place to speak against Mr. Warren, but there are some queer rumors. Any one could see that Master Harry was jealous of the doctor—"

"That will do, Wilson," interrupted Edith, haughtily. "You will remain here until I return."

She walked back to Bradshaw and Phyllis, outwardly calm, but feeling that every onward step was a miracle.

The pair were laughing together, but Edith's haggard face arrested their mirth. She told them what she had heard from Wilson, calmly, as she thought and without emotion, but her mouth was quivering, and her hands, when she unclenched them, trembled pitiably. "What do you think," Mr. Bradshaw?" she concluded, looking up at him with eyes of anguish.

"I think," answered Bradshaw, still dense, as men always are where women are concerned, "I think that things look very black for our friend Lester."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Edith, clasping his hand between hers and forgetting everything save that her lover might be in peril. "Oh, no! But you will save him, won't you? You are so good and brave and strong. Oh, for my sake, save him!"

"Why sure, I'll save him if there's any saving to be done. Can you give me a horse?"

"Oh, yes, of course. A dozen if you like."

"Never could ride more than one at a time," said Bradshaw, cheerily pretending not to notice her emotion. "Perhaps, under the circumstances, Miss Harland will go and order it for me, while I arrange matters with you. And say, Miss Harland, just tell that groom to fix us a horse for himself. I want him to show me where Mr. Warren was driving that peculiar load."

Phyllis tripped away elegantly. She would be elegant on the Day of Judgment. And when she had gone Bradshaw turned and took Edith's hands in his.

"Little girl," he said gravely, "I think I had better withdraw that proposal of mine. You told me a dreadful fib. There is another man, after all. What are you going to do if I bring him back? Will you promise not to say any more nasty things to me about Lord Arncliffe's money?"

"I will promise anything! said Edith, fervently.

Wilson cantered up, a horse for Bradshaw, who turned to bid farewell to the two girls.

"Don't worry, Miss Holt," he said. "Ten to one Lester is all right; but if he isn't I will see him through the game."

"But you won't run any risks?" pleaded Phyllis, with the nearest approach to real anxiety she had ever exhibited.

When an Englishman boasts, his hearers put him down rightly as a mere braggart, but it is dangerous to judge an American on the same lines. He may boast; but, in his own language, he "makes good."

"Say," remarked Bradshaw, confidently, "there aren't any two men in the country are going to get ahead of me when I spread myself."

He swung himself lightly into the saddle, took his hat off, with a kindly smile to Edith and an ardent glance at Phyllis, and cantered off with the easy swing of a horseman bred on the Western prairies.

On to the village: two minutes of hasty chat with Inspector Hobson, who, according to custom, had gone down to the post-office, and then onward, accompanied by Wilson, until he reached the point where May Mannering had seen Warren drive past.

"That will do," said Bradshaw. "I will play a lone hand now. Keep your mouth shut, partner, and you are liable to earn money."

The American trotted slowly along the narrow lane, scanning it closely as he went. There was no trail that it was possible to follow. But he was not looking for tracks, on the road. There were altogether too many of them. What he wanted was an indication of tracks leaving the road. And presently he found them. The line of the dog-cart over the moor was so distinct that he could follow it at a hand gallop. To a man who had ridden the prairies, the inequalities of the ground offered no obstacles. He just hung his rein loose and left matters to the horse.

He held on until he came in sight of the deserted shooting-box, a place built almost like a Martello tower. He pulled up his horse.

"I guess," he murmured softly, and then, as the face of Leigh appeared at one of the windows, "Surest thing, you know," he added, still quietly. Without further ado, he tethered his horse to a stump and walked briskly toward the door.

Leigh met him. Bradshaw had expected him to meet him, and the two men stood a little apart eyeing each other warily.

"Now," said Bradshaw, in placid self-communing, "if I didn't have a little gun in my pocket, thirty-eight calibre, self-cocking, safety trigger, I'd get licked out of my socks. I wouldn't fight that man in a square rough and tumble for eleven and a half million dollars.

Leigh, however, did not seem inclined to fight. He had often seen Bradshaw at the inn, and he made a clumsy attempt to pass matters over.

"Good day sir," he said, pulling at his greasy cap.

"I know," replied Bradshaw. "But where is Dr. Lester?"

The gypsy started, and then stepped forward threateningly. "You know too much, maister," he growled.

"Not a bit," said Bradshaw cheerfully. "You can never learn too much. But you had better show me up to Dr. Lester, who, I presume, is partaking of your hospitality at the present moment."

Leigh cast a comprehensive eye around; he saw that Bradshaw was alone. The American's lean figure seemed to amuse him.

"Maister," he said, "I am either going to put you with Dr. Lester up there, or else I am going to hurt you. But if I do that, it will be your own fault."

Bradshaw smiled grimly. "Partner," he said cheerfully, "there are two notches in the butt end of my gun, and they represent two men who are probably complaining of the drought at this very moment. Throw up your hands, quick!"

And now that thirty-eight was covering the burly figure of the poacher.

"I am giving you a little license because people don't seem to know how to get shot in this God-forsaken country, but I'll surely kill you in a minute," cried Bradshaw again.

He was right indeed when he said that English poeple did not understand getting shot. Leigh did not realize the peril of a pistol pointed at him by a man who meant to shoot, and he ran forward like a bull. Bradshaw, cool as ice, took a quick aim at the solar plexus—that spot beloved of the prize-fighter. If you hit a man there he goes down, and in addition there is always the pleasing possibility of cutting his spine in two. And so Bradshaw pulled the trigger of the pistol. The hammer dropped, but no report followed. He pulled the trigger again, but the hammer did not answer.

That beautiful, thirty-eight "gun," which had faithfully killed two men, had gone out of order at one of the most crucial moments of his life.

Bradshaw dodged away alertly, still pulling the trigger in desperation, though he knew well that it was hopeless to expect any result. Then he flung the useless weapon at his adversary and bolted.

It was not a retreat, but merely a strategic retirement. He could see clearly that he must be worsted in a hand-to-hand fight with the gigantic poacher, and he was looking around for some weapon with which to equalize matters a little. He lighted presently on a guarled stick, a fair enough cudgel, and returned to the fray with set teeth. Leigh sent the disabled revolver spinning through the air to him, and greeted this new attack with a burst of bucolic laughter.

"Don't do it, maister," he cried. "You're a rare plucked 'un, but there's nobody on all the border can stand against me, old as I am."

"Isn't there?" said Bradshaw, dangerously calm. "I don't belong here. The only border I know is the Mexican border, and down there we see things through to a finish."

He was still advancing, and Leigh, realizing that in the matter of activity he was at a serious disadvantage, stood firm, watching for an opening. He began to understand that this lean, wiry young man was a formidable antagonist.

Still Bradshaw came on, so slowly that the suspense became wearing—ten feet, nine feet, only six feet.

"Look here, sir,"—began the poacher.

Bradshaw sprang forward, his stick uplifted to strike. It was just the sort of foolishness Leigh looked for, and while one arm went up like a flash to ward the blow, the other was swung forward to clutch the American in a grip that would hold him helpless as a child.

But the blow did not fall as Leigh expected. The heavy stick swished through the air, but the parrying arm was untouched, and an instant afterward Leigh was rolling on the ground in uncontrollable agony from the swift stroke that had fallen on his knee-cap.

As Bradshaw explained afterwards, there was no "fair fight" nonsense about him. He knew that in a moment Leigh would be up again, envenomed by his sufferings, and for that reason more formidable than ever. So he coolly stepped over the prostrate man and dealt him a vicious blow, not extremely particular whether it might prove fatal or not.

"I guess, partner, you've miscalculated on borders, this trip," he muttered, looking at his fallen foe, from whose head there ran an ugly trickle of blood. "And now for Lester."

He strode into the house and instinctively made his way to the upper rooms, coming at length to a locked door.

"Lester!" he shouted: "Lester!"

There was no answer.

"Good Lord! They've wiped him out! I must go and see if that old border champion has the key."

He went down again, and, to his surprise, found Leigh sitting up and rubbing his head, a little dazed, but apparently not much the worse for his injuries. Bradshaw was frankly afraid even now of this man with his sinister face and enormous chest development, but he went up to him with all the arrogance of a conqueror.

"Now, then," he said, sharply. "Where is Dr. Lester? No, no, sit quiet, my friend, or this time I'll kill you for keeps!"

Leigh was thoroughly cowed. He had not forgotten that merciless blow, dealt him when he lay helpless on the ground. This slightly built man, with the thin mouth and unflinching eyes, was a revelation to him.

"Don't be hard on a poor chap," he whined. "The doctor is up-stairs, as well as you are. I'd just taken him a bit of grub when you came."

"You're a liar!" was Bradshaw's uncompromising retort. "I've shouted myself hoarse without obtaining any reply."

Leigh almost chuckled.

"By gum!" he cried, "I told Maister Warren the doctor was a real gentleman! He gave his word he wouldn't utter a sound if we didn't gag him, and I trusted him."

"Here," said Bradshaw, "go up ahead of me and let him out. No nonsense, mind, or I'll brain you."

Thus politely adjured, Leigh led the way to Lester's prison-room, and in a minute rescued and rescuer were clasping hands.

"Why in thunder didn't you answer when I called just now?" asked Bradshaw.

"I could not," answered Lester, simply. "I had given my word."

"Say," exclaimed his rescuer with some disgust, "you are too good to be true. However, it's all right now, and the sooner I restore you to your sorrowing friends the better. Do you know that Miss Holt is worrying about you just a million times more than you deserve?"

"Miss Holt?"

"Yes, of course, Miss Holt. But come along—you can ride behind me on my horse—and tell me about things on the way. As for you, my friend," to Leigh, "I guess the British policeman will get hold of you whenever you are wanted."

"I give up, sir," said Leigh, calmly. "I saw Mr. Warren knock the old gent on the head, and he's been bribing me ever since to keep quiet. But I've got the books he did it for, and I'm ready to hand them over whenever they're wanted."

"I have settled all that," interposed Bradshaw. "I suspected you directly Dr. Lester disappeared and by this time Detective Hobson has been through your place with a search-warrant. Anyway, you will vamoose now; but if you take my advice you will stay and face the music."

Lester and Bradshaw mounted the horse and left Leigh to consider the situation. Their mount was a fine up-standing animal, and entirely capable of carrying double-weight for at least a fair portion of the journey. Luckily, however, they fell in with a farmer driving into the village when they reached the road, and so Lester was given a lift.

Bradshaw was naturally eager for details of the kidnapping of Lester, but, strangely enough, the subject seemed utterly uninteresting to the young doctor, who kept delicately engineering the conversation round to Edith. What he heard filled his heart with happiness. Edith was true, after all! And then came the despairing thought—would she forgive him?

Phyllis was right. Lester was going to be abject indeed.

CHAPTER XXI.

Mrs. Warren Is Surprised.

Detective-Inspector Hobson fidgeted up and down the broad drive leading to Arncliffe Hall. True to his instincts, he lurked more or less among the bordering bushes. To do him justice, he acted so that he could see without being seen. That humiliating experience with Leigh had not been lost upon him.

But, when he caught sight of Lester and Bradshaw approaching the Hall there was no necessity for concealment; so he ran out and waved them a triumphant greeting. "I've got him!" he cried. "I've got him!"

"Got whom?" asked Bradshaw as they came up. "Have you tracked the fell mare of night to her nest at last?"

"Oh, you may chaff, sir," cried Hobson, cheerily. "Anyway, I have laid by the heels the man who knocked Mr. Aingier on the head, and I think I have got hold of the man who murdered Lord Arncliffe. He is one and the same person—Mr. Harry Warren; and if Harry Warren does not stretch a rope pretty soon you may call me an idiot."

"But," said Bradshaw, mildly, "I have called you an idiot all the time. No doubt you are right about Warren; at the sametime, if you are so sure of your man, I want to know why in thunder you cast suspicion on Miss Holt?"

Hobson smiled in what he thought to be a superior manner. "My dear sir," he said, with a touch of condescension, "you don't understand the methods of the force. I simply pretended to suspect Miss Holt in order to throw Warren off his guard."

"Then you always believed him to be the real culprit?"

"I never had a doubt from the first. The trouble was that I hadn't a scrap of evidence to act upon."

"Hobson," said the American, earnestly, "you are wasted in an effete country like this. Come with me to New York. I'm a big man there—bigger than you'd guess—and I'll guarantee you'll be bossing the police headquarters inside of six months."

"But," murmured the other, deprecatingly, "wouldn't the appointment of a foreigner like me cause a lot of jealousy?"

"Foreigner! My dear Hobson, an artistic perverter of the truth like you cannot selfishly be claimed by any one country. He belongs to humanity."

The detective's inordinate vanity so often led him into the traps prepared for him by Bradshaw that he had ceased to acknowledge compliments of the sort with anything more than a sickly smile.

"Never mind, Sherlock," continued the New Yorker, patting him on the shoulder. "I once met an easier mark than you—in Sacramento about ten years ago. Tell us how you got on."

"Splendidly, sir," answered Hobson, glad of an opportunity to show himself in a favorable light. "I obtained a search-warrant and went to Leigh's cottage—accompanied, I don't mind telling you, by P. C. Fox, who is as strong as a bull, for that poacher would be a deuced nasty customer to tackle."

"Easy!" cried Bradshaw, complacently. "Dead easy!"

He intended presently to allow the full details of his battle with Leigh to be dragged from him.

"However, there was no need to produce the warrant," went on Hobson. "There was no one in the place excepting an old woman who might have been a hundred. And she was as dead as a door-nail!"

"What I expected," interposed Lester. "I might have stayed it off for a time, but when I told Leigh my opinion he thought I was working for my own ends, and would not believe me."

"Well, gentlemen, we made a *quick* search. There was *not* much furniture in the place, yet nothing turned up at first. There was an old iron bound box, and in it, if you'll believe me, we found a stocking with nearly a hundred pounds, some of the money dating back to George III."

"Of course," said Bradshaw, with a little cough, P. C. Fox, as your subordinate, cannot expect to share—"

"Oh, do let him tell his story, there's a good chap," interrupted Lester, earnestly. "This is a serious matter, and considering what it means to Miss Holt—"

Bradshaw shrugged his shoulders. "If I can't infuse innocent joy into the proceedings, I'll dry up," he said. "Proceed, Vidocq."

"So," continued the detective, "we moved the poor old woman eventually, and searched the bed. And there we found what we were looking for—Lord Arncliffe's private account-book, and his pass-book as well. Although the items in the private book had all been checked they did not tally with the pass-book in dozens of cases. I should judge, speaking roughly, that there is a defalcation of at least three thousand pounds."

"But how does this incriminate Warren?" asked Bradshaw, aware that the detective was unaware of Lester's exciting adventure, and wondering how Hobson had reached his conclusions.

"Wait a minute, sir. I telephoned the bank at Alnwick and learnt that Warren had a small account there. And from the day he opened it, he has never sent in his pass-book to be made up."

Lester, thinking abstractedly of Edith, had scarcely assimilated half the conversation, but he dropped in a question. "What do you gather from that?"

"Well, sir," replied Hobson, with the dignity of the man who has "arrived," as the French say, "I can't bring myself to call people 'fools,' and "idiots,' and 'beasts,' like some others I could mention. But, if I wanted to be rude, I should say any one was very dense who could not realize how Warren had robbed Lord Arncliffe and kept things going with a false-pass-book."

"You've hit it, Hobson," agreed the American, heartily, "and I take back all I've said—I didn't mean five per cent of it anyway. Just listen to this," and he ran rapidly over the details of Lester's kidnapping and subsequent rescue. "Now, where is Warren? Have you got him in the calaboose?"

"So far as I know, ser, he is down in the village, visiting the various public houses. When I said I had laid him by the heels, I did not mean that I had actually arrested him. But it will come before the day is out, and nothing will be lost by a little delay. Meanwhile, Fox is shadowing him, and if he attempts to escape, he will be arrested at once. What I want to do is to net his mother, too, as an accessory after the fact."

"But this is simply outrageous!" exclaimed Lester, indignantly. "Do you think any judge in the land will sentence a mother for endeavoring to shield her son?"

Hobson ceded the point for the moment. He had a theory which he had mentioned to none. It would not be his fault if the Arncliffe puzzle did not attract widespread attention in its ultimate solution.

Bradshaw, by the grace of Miss Phyllis Harland, having little, now, save a friendly interest in Edith, had made Lester happy, were it not for the haunting fear that he had offended his divinity beyond forgiveness. Lester had never learned the golden rule that no one should fall in love for the first time. And so, when he found himself almost in the presence of of his lady he sheltered himself behind an armor of icy reserve, after the manner of his caste.

"Wait here," said Bradshaw, as they entered the library. "I won't be a minute."

Lester, left to himself, glanced out over the broad acres of Arncliffe, and the sight of the rolling meadows and noble woods brought back to him all the old question of disparity. Before, at least, she was under a cloud, and he could offer her something of p
But now—
So he built up a harrowing
himself dying in an African sw
her dear name upon his lips, a
midst of this pleasing rever
lasted for perhaps ten minutes
interrupted by the voice of Bra
"There you are Miss Holt
him, safe and sound! Had
smack on the head, but I u
the great British people have r
chick skulls. Good-by! I'll
later."
Edith, lured into the room
false pretenses, stood spellbou
sight of the man in whose b
had been suffering agonies of
Lester, taken off his guar
st