

The girl put a hand on his arm.

"When the call has come? When my days are numbered, Ivo?" she said.

He almost burst out into an oath.

"I'd rather be recognized, and called by my own name and nature," he said, bitterly. "But it's all nonsense, Netta. Do, for God's sake, believe it!"

He was so obviously overwrought, the situation was so painful, that his friend persuaded him, on personal grounds, to leave.

They punted across, dropped down a distance, and brought up under the bank in a quiet spot.

"Very well," said Cante. "You'll tell me, perhaps, what's the matter?"

"Can't you see? She's dying."

He dropped his face into his hands with a groan of impotent suffering.

"There's some mystery here," said his friend quietly.

Monk locked up and burst out in a sudden lost fury.

"There is, by God!" Jack the Skipper."

Cante was rolling a cigarette imperturbably.

"Who's—Jack the Skipper?" he dawdled.

"I wish you could tell me," cried the other. "I wish you could show these the way to his throat!" He held out his hands. "They'd fasten!" he whispered.

He came all of a sudden, quite quietly, and sat by his friend.

"It's been going on for three weeks now," he said rapidly. "They call him that about here—a sort of skit on the other—the other beast, you know. He appears at night—a sort of ghoulish, indescribable monster, black and huge and dripping, and utters one beastly sound and disappears. Nobody's been able to trace him or see where he comes from or goes to. He just appears in the night, in all sorts of unexpected places—houseboats, and bungalows, and shanties by the water and terrifies some lonely child or woman, and is gone. The devil!—O, the devil! We've made parties and hunted him, to no good. It's a regular reign of terror hereabouts. People don't dare being left alone after dark. He frightened the little Cunningham child into a fit and it's not expected to re-

cover. Mrs. Bancroft died of an apoplexy after seeing it. And the worst of it is, a deadly superstition's seized the place. Its visit's got to be supposed to presage death, and—"

He seized Cante's hand convulsively. "Damn it! It's unnatural, Ned! The river's haunted—here, in cockney Datchet—in the twentieth century! You don't believe in such things—tell me you don't! But Netta—"

His head sunk on his breast. Cante blew out a placid whiff of smoke.

"But—Miss Varley?" he said.

"You know—you've heard—at least," said the other "what she was. The thing suddenly stood before her, when she was alone, one night. Well—you see what she is now."

"I don't see, nevertheless, why she don't"

"Pack and run? No more do I. Put it to her if you like. I've said my say. But she's in the grip—thinks she'd had her call—and there's no moving her. Cante, she's just dying where she stands."

Cante's cigarette made a tiny arc of light and hissed in the river. He had heard of epidemic hysteria. The world was full of cranks.

"Now," he said, "drop the subject, please. Shall I tell you of some fools I've come across in my time?"

He related some of his experiences in the Patent Office. The most impudent invention ever proposed, he said, was a burglar's tool for snipping out and holding by suction in one movement a disc of window glass. His dry, self-confidence had a curiously reassuring effect on the other. While they ate and drank and smoked and talked, the life of the river had gradually become attenuated and delivered to silence; a mist rose and hung above the water; sounds died down and ceased, concentrating themselves into the persistent dismal yelp of a dog somewhere on the bank above; the lights, in the houseboats thinned to isolated sparks—twelve o'clock clanged from a distant tower.

Then all at once he was alert and quietly active.

"Monk, listen to me. I'm going to cure Miss Varley."