

'That *is* unfortunate. I have come a long way to see him. I *must* see him. When will he be back?'

'This afternoon or this evening, I hope; but possibly not until to-morrow morning. But won't you come in and rest a little?'

The man gave his horse to a boy and walked slowly up the steps. For some moments he made no reply, and at last, looking at her in an abstracted kind of way, apparently without really seeing her, muttered:

'Well, that *is* awkward!' He paused again, deep in thought, and, seeming to arrive at some conclusion, he said, 'Miss Hardy, I *must* see your father; it is a matter almost of life and death, and I am almost certain to miss him if I follow him now. Will you allow me to wait until he returns?'

'I shall see Mr. Whitton, my father's agent, at luncheon, and if he can put you up you are very welcome to stay.'

The stranger bowed, inwardly a little amused perhaps at Mr. Whitton's position in the matter.

Miss Hardy suggested that possibly he had not yet breakfasted, and as the surmise proved entirely correct he was left to entertain himself while she went off to give the necessary orders.

Breakfast over, the young man returned to the

stoep, and in an enclosed portion of it discovered Miss Grace among the ferns and hot-house plants. For some minutes after the first few remarks he watched in silence, and then, as she paused to study the effect of a rearrangement in a small basket of ferns, he asked quietly :

‘ Are you Miss Gracie ?’

She looked up quickly, flushing a little, and then said coldly :

‘ Yes, I am Miss Hardy.’

‘ I mean no impertinence, Miss Hardy. I asked if you are Miss Gracie because I heard of you by that name twelve years ago.’

‘ Indeed! Then you are an old friend of my father’s?’

‘ Well, yes, I believe he would consider me so. But I should have told you my name before this. Pardon the omission. Ansley it is — George Ansley.’

‘ Ah—Mr. Ansley! Yet I don’t remember ever hearing him speak of you. But be sure of this, if you were his friend then, you will be his friend now. He does not forget old friends. Let me see. Twelve years ago. Those were the early days—those were his hard times when you knew him.’

‘ Yes, he was down then—very down; and I am very glad he has prospered. No man better deserved it.’

The girl's eyes grew a little misty—this was her weak point. She looked up at him, saying simply:

‘ Thank you.’

Ansley smiled slightly, and said :

‘ There was a photograph of you that he had then. A little girl in short dresses, a very serious, earnest-looking little girl—all eyes. I can remember wishing to see you then. I wanted to see if your eyes really looked like that. They *do*, you know. But, still, I can't imagine that you are his “ little girl.” ’

Miss Grace laughed and blushed a good deal under the scrutiny and criticism, and suggested good-humouredly that if he would go with her she would show him the original photograph, and he could satisfy himself on that point.

From one of the drawing-room tables she took a folding frame made to hold two photographs, and pointing to the right-hand one, handed it to him. After a full minute's close inspection, Ansley looked up, smiling gravely at the girl.

‘ There is no mistaking it,’ he said ; ‘ that is the photograph. I would know it anywhere. It made a great impression on me when I first saw it on account of a little incident that was in a sort of way connected with it.’

‘ What was that ?’

As she asked the question he glanced from the

photograph to the other side of the frame, where there was a little faded, old-fashioned Christmas card. As it caught his eye a half-suppressed exclamation escaped him, and, oblivious of the girl's presence, he drew the card out and read the writing on the back; and then, glancing out through the open window, he thought of how he had first seen it.

As Miss Grace looked at him, she saw that his brown sunburnt face looked a little lined and careworn. Under the dark moustache the mouth drooped rather sadly at the corners, and the eyes were large and sad too just now. She watched him for a little while, and then, interrupting his thought, said gently:

'Well, Mr. Ansley, I am waiting to hear the incident of which I was the unconscious heroine.'

'A thousand pardons. It was thinking of that very incident that made me forget your question. It cannot be an accident that those two cards are in the same frame. Of course, you must know the history?'

'Of course, *I* do; but surely you cannot; why, the Christmas card it is impossible that you could have seen.'

'No, not impossible, Miss Hardy. It was I who brought it to your father the night he found the diamonds!'

The girl stood before him, hands clasped, and amazed. Wonderingly she looked at him, and the more she looked the more she wondered. How utterly different from what she had fancied! In her mind's eye she had seen a tall, awkward youth, loose-jointed and rough, silent and stupid, and here was the real Simon Pure, tall and slight, certainly, but supple and well-knit, quiet and courteous.

'Well, this is wonderful!' she exclaimed at last in helpless amazement; and then her face flushed with generous enthusiasm. 'Oh, Mr. Ansley, you don't know what pleasure, what happiness this will be to my father! You don't know how he has longed to find you. This will be the happiest Christmas he has ever spent.'

'Do you really think he will be glad to see me?'

'Oh, you don't know him if you can ask such a question. But why did you never come to us before?'

'Because I never wanted his help before, and I could not have refused it. He is the only man in this world from whom I would ask help, and I have come to ask it now. It is no trifle. It will be the hardest task he has ever had.'

'Whatever it is, Mr. Ansley, if he can do it he will. I would pledge my life on that. He owes you much, and I owe you what I can perhaps

never in all my life repay. At least, you will let us be your friends.'

She extended both hands to him as she spoke. The soft firm touch of the girl's hands sent a pleasant tingle through him. It was genuine. It made him feel that this time he had fallen amongst friends. A feeling that he had never known in his life came over him, the feeling that there was a home where he would be always welcome, and that there were two people who would always be genuinely glad to see him.

The first surprise over, she made him recount most minutely every detail of that Christmas night. He told how the letter had been entrusted to him for delivery by the tipsy digger, and every little incident up to the finding of the diamonds.

'When we found the tin full,' he said, 'we were so excited that we thought very little of the boys. We searched them one by one and passed them behind us. I had passed the last, when I turned and found your father standing by me looking helpless and dazed, instead of guarding the door, as I thought he was doing. I looked round, and saw that the boys had bolted, so I took the packets we had found on them and put them down on the piece of oilskin with the tin. I thought it best then to leave him to himself, and as he stooped slowly to pick up the diamonds I stepped out of

the hut and went home. I should have seen him the next day, I am certain, but when I got home I found my father and a digging friend mad with excitement about a new find some thirty miles off. We started for the place that night, and did not return for some months.'

'But how was it you did not meet him even then?'

Ansley laughed, as he answered hesitatingly:

'Well, Miss Hardy, the fact is, I did often meet him; but I was a youngster then—very foolish, and sensitive, and proud in my silly boyish way, and though I knew well and often heard that he wanted to find me, I could not bring myself to go up to him and say, "I am the man who saved your fortune for you." It seemed to me I might as well have said, "What do you mean to pay me?" I could not do it. And though I knew, too, that he could not possibly recognise me from the very imperfect view he had of me in the dark little tent, yet when I met him in camp I used to turn away from him and feel hurt and sick and sore that he did not know me. Then a little later, as you know, he left Kimberley, and was away for a long, long time, and so it has been during twelve years. He has been much away, and so have I, and although I have often seen him, we have never actually met. Once in London I would have

spoken to him. I was then, as I thought, a rich man, and I could afford to speak without fear of being misunderstood, but I missed him. I wish to God I had not, Miss Gracie ; I wish I had met you both then. Nothing has gone well with me since. Bad luck has followed me and all connected with me since then. It is the last and worst stroke that has brought me here.' He looked into the lustrous eyes and sympathetic face of the girl, and added, half playfully, half sadly: 'I wish I had met you before; I believe you would have changed my luck. Do you know, I think you are one of those who bring good luck. You have a good influence—I can feel it.'

'If I have'—and the girl laughed brightly—'I mean to exert it from this very moment. Firstly, then, you must get out of the blues. Secondly, you must make up your mind to stay till my father returns; and thirdly, you will have to submit with the best grace possible to the infliction of my company while I show you the sights and do the honours of our home.'

Whatever sacrifice of personal feelings Ansley may have made in the cause of gallantry was borne with Spartan fortitude and concealed with admirable skill; in fact, a casual observer would have been inclined to think that he rather liked it.

If he was not very talkative and lively, he made up for it by being an admirable listener—one of those listeners whose very look is full of quiet and intense appreciation of all that is said. She was content to play the cicerone, and it pleased him too, and so the morning passed.

She took him through the grounds, idling along amongst the summerhouses and trellised rose-walks, telling him of their life there, of their plans, of her own life during the years that had passed since he first heard of her—in fact, all the reminiscences which form the heart and charm of the meeting, whether of old friends, or of the friends of old friends, or of those who have a common bond of sympathy wrought in a distant country or in a troublous time.

Luncheon over, Miss Grace may have thought she had answered the calls of hospitality, or she may have been tired of his company, or she may have thought that the change could do him good—it is hard to say. But, any way, she handed her guest over to the tender mercies of Whitton, and for the rest of the afternoon, instead of her talk and her company, Ansley had to put up with the agent and his dissertations on farm prospects for the coming season.

At about sundown, returning with Whitton from an inspection of the stables, Ansley saw with no

little relief and satisfaction a slim figure in a gray dress moving about the lawn; and, leaving the estimable but prosy Whitton with the flimsiest of apologies, he joined his hostess.

‘Really, Miss Hardy,’ he said, coming up to her, ‘I began to think you had vanished like the “baseless fabric.” I was afraid you were going to leave me with Whitton for the evening as well.’

‘Did you not enjoy his company, Mr. Ansley? I think him so entertaining and instructive,’ she added demurely.

‘Oh yes, indeed!’ he answered hastily; ‘but I mean, I think he knows too much for me. You see, I don’t quite follow his theories—at least, some of them.’

‘What a prettily-inferred compliment, Mr. Ansley!’ and, making him a mock-curtsey, she added, ‘Then you think *I* am sufficiently stupid to be entertaining?’

‘Quite so, Miss Hardy—more of my own calibre, you know,’ he returned, laughing.

‘Thank you for that, too. My friend, you have a ready wit, and have got out of it better than you deserved; and, though you don’t merit it, I mean to show you the river this evening—that is, if you are quite sure that you wouldn’t prefer listening to Mr. Whitton.’

‘Well, Miss Hardy, I could devote a lifetime to

agriculture, but the passion of my life is certainly exploring. Your descriptions have so fired my soul with enthusiasm and ambition that I am afraid I shouldn't die happy if I didn't know the geography of this part of the river. In the cause of science, let us go.'

The girl answered gravely:

'In the cause of science, we shall go.'

The evening was one of those stilly, cool summer evenings so common in South Africa, when the night seems full of still life; the moonlight, strong and clear, has nothing sombre in it, and the gentlest of cool breezes plays through the leaves, bearing along with it the commingled scents of all the blossoms.

As they walked down the gravelled path through the orange-groves the crickets sang merrily all around, and from the river came the sound of the frogs—that most curious of all evening sounds. From the house it sounded like one monotonous roar, but as one drew nearer the river the individual voices could be distinguished, and every note on the gamut was given by that orchestra. Now and again, without any apparent reason, the music would suddenly cease and a dead silence ensue; and then, doubtless at a signal from the conductor, the whole band would strike up again.

They strolled on down to the little jetty where the boat was moored, and helping his companion to the cushioned seat in the stern, Ansley pushed the little craft out and rowed lazily up in mid-stream.

From the river the groves and gardens showed up most distinctly, and over and beyond them the house was discernible under the huge trees that stood at the sides and back of it. The moonlight softened and silvered everything, and the scent of the orange-blossoms gave a dreamy, exquisite, impalpable finish to the night.

Pausing in midstream, Ansley asked his companion if she knew the song 'Carissima,' adding, 'You know, I think it must have been on such a night as this that he serenaded her in his boat. "The moonlight trembling on the sea," and "the breath of flowers," that he sings of are here, and "the orange-groves so dark and dim"—now all we want is the dreamy, distant sound of the "Vesper Hymn." Will you sing the song itself, Miss Hardy? That will be better than any "Vesper Hymn."'

She sang, as he asked, in a sweet, low voice suited to the song and the time and the surroundings; and as the last call of 'Carissima,' so appealingly gentle, so soft and clear, floated away, he rested on his oars and watched her. Presently he said:

‘There is, I think, no power so far-reaching, so universally felt, as the power of music. There is none—excepting, of course, the magnetic power of individuals over each other—which can so stir a man’s better nature. It seems—and especially at night—to elevate one’s thoughts and hopes, to strike a higher chord in human nature.’

‘Yes, it is so. It raises a feeling of devotion. To me, it is the poetry of religion.’

And so they talked as the boat glided along; talked of the ‘little things we care about,’ which are of no interest to anyone else, but which help us greatly to know one another. And the time slipped quietly by, like the silent water moving to the eternal sea. Now and then there were scraps of conversation, but more often the long silences of content. The girl lay back in the cushioned stern trailing one hand in the water, barely cool after the long summer day; the man dipped his oars now and again for the slowest, laziest of strokes, and watched the blades glisten in the moonlight and the diamond drops plash back on the shining surface of the water.

Once or twice in the long silences Ansley had roused himself, and half bent forward, as though about to say something, but, changing his mind, had taken a few lazy pulls at the oars and sent the boat gliding along again. But when they turned

to drift down stream again he shipped the oars, and, after a little pause, said :

‘If you do not mind, I should like to tell you something of the business that has brought me here. I want help for a friend, and I want advice—your advice ! But, even apart from that, I should like you to know.’

She answered promptly and truthfully :

‘I should like to know, and oh ! I would give anything to help you !’

‘I believe you would like to help me, Miss Gracie ; indeed I do !’ Ansley said, flushing a little nervously. ‘You can scarcely realize what a difference this day has made to me. This morning I would have said I had but one friend in the world, now I believe I have three ; and that makes all the difference in the world to me. I confess I did hope, though I was by no means sure, that I could count on you and your father ; but I feel more confident now. You have been more than kind to me, and even if your father cannot help me, yet for the welcome you have given me I shall always count you as my friends.’

The girl, for answer, put out her hand to him. The firm, honest grip, or the mere act perhaps, seemed to confuse him for the moment, to put him off ; and he sat silently looking down into the hands which had just released hers. It was only

for a few seconds, however, and then he looked up at her and began abruptly :

‘My other friend is a man named Norman. It is on his account that I have come here. He has been on the Diamond Fields off and on ever since they were found, and, like all others, he made and lost money alternately until about two years ago ; then the death of his father, with whom he had always shared interests, left him large holdings in several of the best companies. The business had been conducted under the style of Norman and Davis, and on the father’s death young Norman left everything in the hands of Davis and went off on an eighteen months’ trip. About six months ago he returned, and found that his position was not all that he had imagined it to be. He found Davis as a man a pretty wealthy man, but he found the firm of Norman and Davis as a firm an exceedingly poor one. The first glance showed him that Davis had worked with system. Whether the conversion had been effected during his absence only or during his easy-going father’s lifetime it was impossible to say ; but the fact remains that the assets which he had looked upon as his had been converted to Davis’s personal estate, and were as secure to him as law could make them. After some weeks of search, however, he found amongst his father’s papers some-

thing which, though not in itself of great importance, yet gave him a good clue, and, making a guess at the probabilities in the case, he wrote to Davis demanding a full settlement in the matter of certain shares which he could now prove belonged to the firm. To cut a long story short, Davis, not knowing what documents had been discovered and fearing a complete exposure, offered to compromise. The more the one yielded the firmer was the other's stand, and it was not till after several interviews that any arrangement was come to. Throughout the whole business Davis's tone had been one of contemptible cringing and meanness. Pleading his family, heavy losses, bad times, and a lot more in that strain, he begged Norman not to be too hard on him. A day was appointed for final settlement, when Davis would hand over some of his ill-gotten wealth. Norman called at the office as appointed, and found his father's partner in a more cheerful frame of mind, seemingly resolved to accept the inevitable with the best possible grace; he treated the matter as a purely business transaction. Finally, he asked Norman to leave the documents with him to allow his clerk to take copies of them. If Norman would call back in half an hour a lawyer would be in attendance, and the business would be finally settled. Norman rose to go, and as he opened the door, Davis said

in a clear, low voice these words: "I am sorry you have done it, Norman. I cannot have anything to do with that kind of business." As he turned to inquire what Davis alluded to, the door closed sharply, and he found himself in the passage and two strangers looking very hard at him. There is no use telling you all the details, Miss Gracie. I feel like a demon when I think of it now. He was arrested and searched, and in one of his side coat-pockets they found a small packet of diamonds. This was proved against him at the trial by the detectives, who swore also that they had heard, as they stood outside the door, Davis refuse to "have anything to do with that kind of business." The clerk swore to Norman's several visits, when he always refused to state his business, wishing to see Mr. Davis privately. Davis himself of course with great reluctance gave evidence against his late partner's son. He told how he had of late been so pestered over this business that he had at last given information in self-defence, fearing that one day it would be discovered, and that he, though wholly innocent, would be incriminated. He hoped the Court would not be hard on the prisoner, as he was sure this was his first offence, and a lesson would suffice. The prisoner, he said, was naturally a straightforward, honest man, and he had never known anything against him before,

etc. The defence was characterized as a miserable failure, and the sentence on the prisoner was "seven years." I cannot tell you, Miss Hardy, half the horrors of that time. It was so terrible that I believe when the trial was over the certainty was no worse to him than the suspense had been. But the cruellest blow of all was to see friends drop away and sheer off when friends were most sorely needed. Norman said he had never seen the diamonds until they were found in his pockets by the detectives, and he could only think it was Davis's fiendish device to place them there while they were talking over the documents in the office. This explanation was openly laughed at. However, the law did not take its course—whether it was an act of negligence or covert friendship it is hard to say—Norman himself does not know; but an opening occurred two days after the trial, and he took it. Next to him stood one of the police-inspector's horses, saddled and ready, even to the revolver in the holsters. The act was so sudden that no attempt at pursuit could be made till he was well away towards the border. Galloping along in the early morning, he met no one for some miles out of camp, until on nearing the border, on the road before him, and coming leisurely towards him, he saw another horseman alone. Slackening his pace to allay suspicion, it was only when close

up that he recognised his late father's partner—the cause of his ruin—Davis ; and not until Norman drew up before him did Davis recognise the man whom he believed to be in gaol. Paralyzed with fright, he sat his horse speechless and helpless. Norman rode up closer until their knees touched, and taking one rein in his hand, he held Davis's horse. " You see I'm out," he said curtly. Davis, white and trembling, could not answer a word. " Give me all the money you have—everything of value. It is all mine, and I want it." The miserable wretch handed out all his money and his watch, together with several diamonds, only too probably the fruits of that early ride. Then Norman spoke again, with, you might say, pitiless hatred. " You know, Davis, what you have done ! You know it is *worse* than death to me. Death would have been a thousand times better. You know—of course, a religious man like you must know—that retribution means an eye for an eye ; but I will not be as hard on you as you were to me. I cannot have your liberty, or your reputation. I cannot break your heart ; but I *can* shoot you, and, by God, I will ! Don't whine, you cur—I didn't, when you dealt me a worse blow. Stand back and take it." There was a report, a scream, and—Davis was settled with.'

Ansley stopped. Before him shone the lustrous,

anxious, frightened eyes of the girl. Her face was colourless, and her hands clasped tightly together. As he stopped there came from the closed lips a breathless whisper—' Ah, God !'

For a full minute he sat looking at her, expecting, hoping she would say more ; but what she had heard seemed to fill her with thoughts too full for words. She asked no explanation—no reason—she could see them all herself. For the present she cared no more about his friend's after-fate—the fatal scene seemed too complete of itself to admit of anything more.

He looked at her wistfully, and said in a husky, pleading voice :

' Nothing can justify that, Miss Hardy, I know : but before you judge him, before you refuse your sympathy and help, think of the awful trial ; think of the fiendish cruelty of the man who had ruined him ; and think of how they met.'

' My sympathy is stronger than ever,' she answered, looking up at him. ' It was a terrible revenge, but no one can say it was more than justice.'

The girl sat silent again, thinking on what she had heard. Ansley was silent, too, feeling a little sore and disappointed at what he thought her disapproval of his friend ; but in reality he was mistaken, and her sympathy was the deeper that

it was not expressed. Several minutes passed thus before either stirred or spoke again. Then Miss Hardy rose and gathered her shawl about her, saying :

‘Come, let us go home. I feel chilly, and oh! I cannot bear to think that a human being’s life can be so spoiled, so utterly, irretrievably ruined. It is too cruel. Indeed, it almost makes one think that this world is not the work of a God of Justice and Mercy. It is horrible! It frightens one to think that misfortune can so single out one man for persecution worse than death. We have but one life—one short little life, to live, and then, to think that, do what we can, that may be spoiled for us for ever!’

‘Do you think that his chance is gone, then—gone for ever? He is still young. Do you think nothing can wipe it out?’

‘Why do you ask me? You know it is a thing one cannot outlive. What would it help that you and I were his friends—you and I and father?—for I know it will be so. I would honour him for his wrongs. I would be proud to be his friend. But it would always hurt to feel the sneers and insults levelled at him. Were they never so well hidden, he would know that they were there. But, for that very reason, I would be proud to take his hand before all the world.’

Ansley's glance kindled with pleasure to see the girl's earnestness, and, as he looked at her, he thought again of the photo he had seen that night twelve years ago. The honest, fearless look of the child came back to him, and it seemed to him that the woman was that child—and something more.

As they reached the stoep she turned to him, standing on the bottom step, and said gently :

'You will pardon my thoughtless chaff about your melancholy, won't you? I did not know then, but now I understand.'

'Never speak of it, Miss Grace. I knew you well enough even then to not misinterpret it. However, we have finished with melancholy now, haven't we? Do you know,' he added, smiling up at her, 'that it is past twelve o'clock, and Christmas morning? Let me wish you every happiness and every blessing. I think you deserve them. I told you I thought you had a good influence, and were born to make others happy. Now I am sure of it. I can speak from experience, for I have felt happier to-day than for many a long day past.'

'If I am that, what are you? Why, you are a Christmas-box yourself. Remember, I have taken possession of you, and mean to present you to father to-morrow morning as my Christmas-box. In the meantime you are mine.'

‘And right welcome is my fate, my lady. Good-night.’ He held her hand lingeringly as he spoke, then slowly bent and touched it with his lips, saying, ‘Good-night, Gracie, my good angel!’

There was a faint whisper, ‘Good-night,’ and she ran quickly up the steps and disappeared indoors.

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The sun had barely risen when Ansley, restless, and anxious for Hardy’s return, left his rooms. Whitton, the overseer, was starting on horseback to go his morning rounds, and Ansley, glad of any means of passing the time, accompanied him. For a couple of hours he rode along with the overseer, listening absently to his one theme of conversation, but as it neared breakfast-time he struck off by a cross-path and rode slowly in the direction of the house.

This Christmas morning Miss Hardy was unusually late, and at seven o’clock she was startled by hearing the sound of a cart on the gravel outside. Catching her father’s voice, she hastened to dress, and in a few minutes was downstairs to meet him; but the servant told her that he had just ridden off with three others, and had left word that he would be back again shortly, and that she must not wait breakfast for him, as he had some most important business to attend to. Wondering much what business could have been important enough

to take him away so suddenly, especially on a Christmas morning, Miss Grace resolved, at any rate, to prepare her surprise for him, and sent for Ansley. But he too had gone out with Whitton, and not returned yet; and she, none too well satisfied, had to be content with her own company.

Having been unable to get away again the previous day, and having resolved to spend Christmas Day with his daughter, Hardy had left Kimberley long before dawn that morning. Driving along as he neared home, Hardy presently heard the sound of horses' hoofs coming on fast behind him, and, looking round, he saw two men ride up. One was a neighbouring farmer with whom he was slightly acquainted, and the other a stranger to him. The farmer told him hurriedly that Norman, the escaped I.D.B. convict, highwayman, murderer, and horse-thief, had been seen in the vicinity, and the detectives—pointing to his companion—were out after him. Hardy could give them no information, having just come out of Kimberley himself, and they were in the act of parting when another horseman came up—the second detective—with the news that he had seen Norman within the last half-hour, but, as he was well mounted and armed, had come for help.

People at a distance from the Diamond Fields cannot realize the hatred and contempt felt by the

honest section there for the I. D. B.'s. It is the crime without parallel there, so that it is not to be wondered at that John Hardy instantly eagerly offered to join the party if they would accompany him to his house, a short way on, where he would leave the trap, and get a mount and arm himself.

Very few minutes elapsed before Hardy, the farmer, and two detectives were riding along fast in the direction in which Norman had been seen. A quarter of an hour's riding brought them to a rise at a considerable distance from the house, and, coming up first, Hardy, who had the best horse, signalled to the others to stop at once; and, dismounting at once, he crept up to watch the man who was riding slowly towards them.

Walking his horse leisurely along, Ansley was lost in the thought of his mission, in speculation as to how Hardy would receive it, and in the recollection of the previous day and evening. A happier look floated across his face as he thought of the young girl standing on the step above him, bathed in the soft moonlight, and his blood quickened a bit as he recalled the timid whispered 'Good-night.'

Suddenly a sense of danger came upon him, and, looking up quickly, he fancied he saw a man's head duck behind the ridge of hill. Reining up his horse instantly, he waited for a moment or so, watching intently and warily the while. Then,

turning his horse's head, he rode towards another elevation, still watching the spot where the head had disappeared.

As he turned four horsemen dashed out, and scattering wide apart, rode towards him. With a muttered curse he tightened the rein and galloped off in an opposite direction. The man's face, soft and gentle as a woman's a moment before, grew hard and colourless; his mouth was set, and his eyes had a bright and wicked gleam in them.

Riding at their best over the rough ground, Ansley kept his lead easily; but Hardy drew away from the others, and they, seeing the chase tend towards the river, took a cut down to the nearest crossing, hoping to cut the pursued man off on the other bank, or take him while swimming the river, as he would have to do further down.

Seeing that Hardy was alone, Ansley slackened his pace till only thirty yards divided them, then, raising his open hand, called to him by name to stop. The answer was a revolver shot, closely followed by a second one, one of which whistled unpleasantly close. Seeing the man with whom he had to deal, Ansley let his horse go, and heading for the deepest part of the river, soon had a lead of several hundred yards. Plunging into the river, he swam his horse across, and as he neared the other side, Hardy, who had ridden his best in the

last bit, came up to the bank and again fired at him. The bullet splashed far behind him, and, looking round, he saw Hardy force his horse into the stream to follow him.

As he reached the bank Ansley slipped off and loosened the girths, then turned and watched his pursuer. The look on his face was not good to see: the expression was vindictive and cruel, for the man's spirit was bitter with rancour. This was the sorest blow of all, that the man who owed him all he had—ay, even his life most likely!—should go out of his way to hunt him down and shoot him like a dog. As he watched, a gleam of light shot into his eyes and a smile flashed across his face, for Hardy's horse began to fail, and once or twice it stopped. The third time it reared up as it felt the spurs again, and Hardy, to save himself, swung off and tried to seize the pommel of the saddle; but the frightened, tired horse swayed round and, striking out wildly with his front feet, brought one down with a crash on Hardy's bare gray head. He was but twenty yards from the bank; he made one weak effort to swim—a white upturned face showed for a moment and then disappeared.

Ansley stood perfectly still, the same smile still curling the corners of his mouth as he watched his pursuer go down. As the water closed over the pale set face, there came to him the faint, trembling

sound of a whispered 'Good-night!' A run, a spring, a few quick strokes, and he had the drowning man by the collar and was dragging him out. A minute later he stretched him out on the bank, and waited for the effects of the blow to pass off.

'My God!' he thought, 'what a demon I have become! *Her* father and *my* friend, and I would have let him die because unknowingly he injured me. I *would* have done it, too, but for her!'

Hardy lay against a grassy bank, and at the first sign of returning consciousness Ansley leaned over him, chafing his hands and watching his eyes for a sign of recognition.

'Where am I?' he asked faintly. 'Ah, I see—I know!' And as he became stronger, he said: 'Ah, I have you; you are my prisoner.' He made a feeble effort to grasp Ansley's throat, but, looking up into his eyes, he dropped back suddenly with a look of intense excitement, exclaiming eagerly: 'Man! Who are you? What is your name? Surely—surely you—the diamonds, you know, that Christmas night! I know you! Now I know you!'

Ansley looked at him steadily, and answered:

'Yes, Mr. Hardy, I am the man you have looked for. My name is George Ansley Norman. But just lie quiet for a few minutes, and you'll be all right. And then we'll get back to the house as soon as we can!'

Hardy closed his eyes and groaned aloud, but after a pause said falteringly :

‘Norman—but the convict—it *can't* be true ! my God ! it *can't* be true !’

‘It *is* true, Hardy. I am the convict, but there was no crime. Between man and man, and by the God above me, I am as innocent of it as you are.’

‘My boy, I believe you, and thank God for it,’ said the old man fervently, and the tears came into his eyes as he added brokenly : ‘And to think that I tried to shoot you. *You*, my best of friends—how can you forgive me !’

‘Oh, that’s all right now—you see, you didn’t do it, so it doesn’t matter ; besides, you did not know me, and how could you help it ?’

While they were talking, on the same bank, a few yards off, the farmer and the two detectives were crouching behind the bushes and creeping closer up.

Hardy spoke again, and a painful flush suffused his face.

‘It is the revolver you took from me that night. I have kept it ever since. I might have shot you with it. Take it from me again, and keep it, for my sake !’

He handed it up as he spoke, and Ansley took it, turned it round once or twice, and stooped to help his friend to rise.

As he bent forward, a voice called out :

‘Shoot quick, before he kills him !’

Two revolver shots rang together, and with a half-stifled cry, Ansley threw up his arms and dropped at Hardy’s feet. A wild scream of agony burst from Hardy, and, weak as he was, his arms were in an instant round his friend.

‘My God !’ he cried wildly, ‘you have murdered him ! Stand back ! leave him ! Speak to me, my boy, speak ! Where is it ? Where are you hit ?’

But Ansley shook his head ; his face was drawn and pale, and there was a look of intense suffering in his eyes. His voice quivered as he whispered slowly :

‘Home — old chap — home — home — your daughter. I want—to—speak—to—her !’

So they carried him back as gently, as tenderly as they could—the man they had hunted and shot down ; they laid him on the bed he had that morning risen from, and three of them left him. Whitton came in and would have tried to stanch the wound, but Ansley shook his head. In broken whispers he told Hardy how he had come to the house and waited for him ; how he had met Grace and told her all, excepting only his identity. He asked him to go to her and tell her that, and ask her would she come to him that he might see her once more.

The smile of welcome died on Grace's lips as she saw her father's face. He told her all as best he could. There was no attempt at control—it would have been useless. The sorrow-stricken old man, with sobs and tears, tried to break it to her, but it required little telling. Distracted with sorrow, remorse, and love for 'his boy,' as he called him, he blamed himself for it. He lost all control of himself.

'My child! my child! three times I tried to shoot him. I would have killed him; and yet I should have drowned, and he saved me—he saved me—the man I tried to shoot! He saved me—he was helping me, when—oh, my God!—they shot him through the back. Come to him, my child. Gracie darling, be brave and bear up. Oh, God! they have killed him!'

She went alone to where the dying man lay. Softly she entered, but he heard her, and his eyes followed her as she walked to his side. In silence she sat by him, taking his hand and stroking it gently. Slowly he was bleeding to death, yet his eyes were bright as he looked at her. He smiled at her and whispered huskily:

'I told you you were my good angel, and see, you have come to me. I *cannot* thank you enough. I asked for you because I want you to bid me one more good-night—good-night for ever. I want

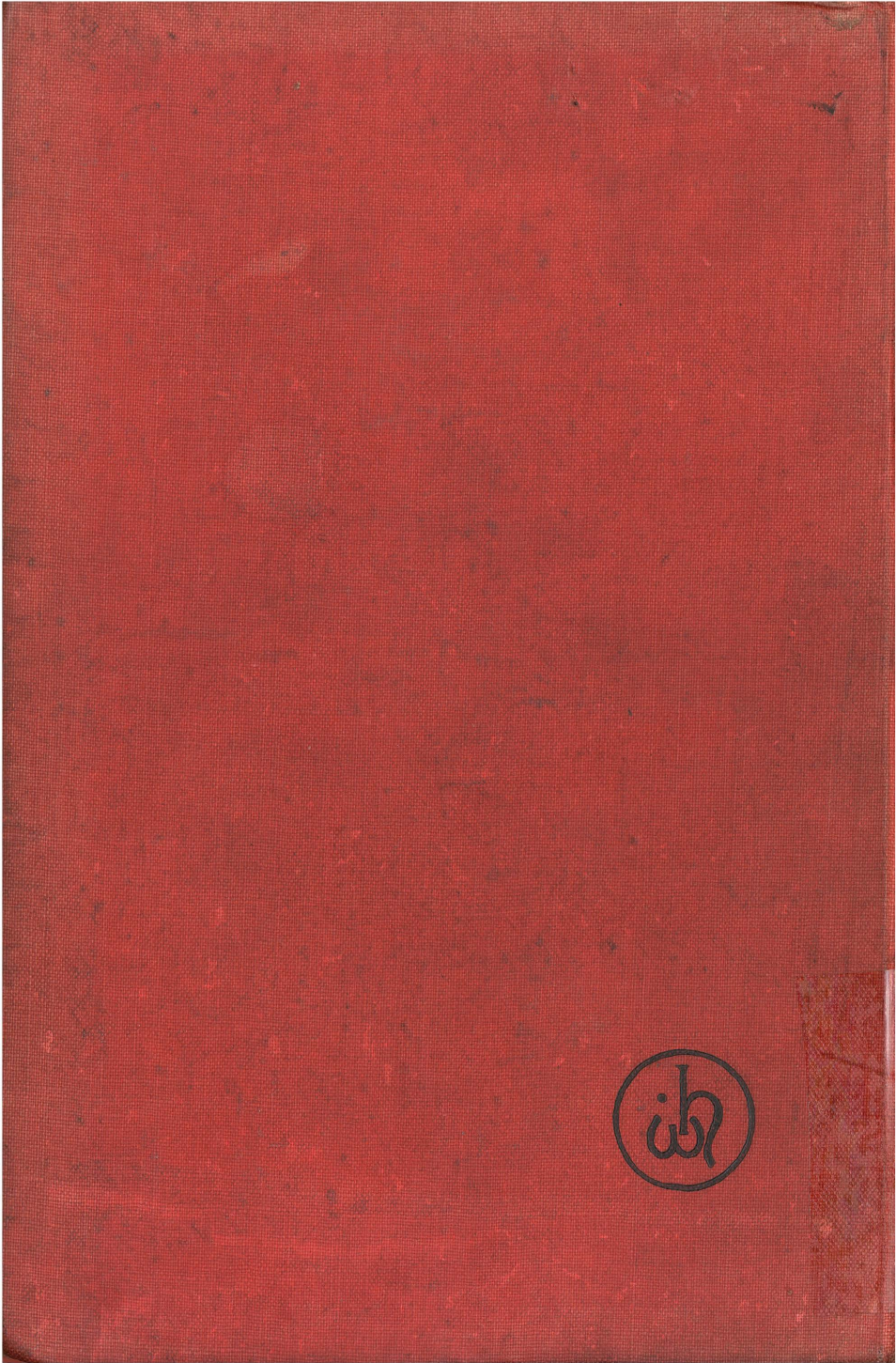
to hear you say I am your friend, of whom you are not ashamed. Can you say it, Gracie ?

The words, the look, were too much. The girl's pent-up grief burst out in one heart-broken cry, and, falling on her knees, she kissed the hand of the man whom rightly or wrongly she honoured above all men.

* * * * *

This was their Christmas Day—twelve years since first their paths had crossed—twelve circles in the web of life! They were three units amongst the countless millions of the earth, and so, what of them? What of sorrow? What of death? What of the wreck of new-born hopes? For to the countless millions it is still A Merry Christmas!

THE END.





Out

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