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A STORY OF A VOICE.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

CHAPTER I.

MR. OLDHAM was in his room at the "Angel," washing his hands before dinner, when the singular and terrible accident happened to him which involved him in so much trouble. He and his party had arrived late the night before, and as it was close upon Commemoration, almost every room was occupied. They had managed to get a sitting-room, it is true, though with great trouble—a sitting-room labelled in gilt letters with the interesting information that her Highness the Duchess of Hesse-Marabout had once held it in Serene occupation — but for bedchambers, the different members of the party had to shift as they best could, some in the attics, some in the wings, wherever a bed was to be had. Mr. Oldham, though rather beyond middle age, and stout enough to count double, was unmarried, and the best thing that could be done for him was a little room at the end of a long passage projecting in a quaint way over the yard of the inn, just by the side of the archway. The "Angel" is an old house, as everybody knows, and full of expedients to make room; this little place was partly built of wood, and looked as if it had been stuck into that corner just for an emergency; it was indeed so entirely an accidental structure that it was propped up underneath by a heavy wooden pillar. If the weather had not been lovely it would have been cold quarters; as it was, being a very forward summer, the extreme ventilation of the room was rather agreeable than otherwise. Oldham was light-afoot though so stout a man, very goodnatured at bottom, but rather impetuous, and prone to momentary ebullitions of temper. He was washing his hands for dinner, somewhat impatient for that meal, which after a long day's course through Blenheim, and all the lions thereabout, was an event which he naturally looked forward to with some eagerness. All sorts of sounds were going on in the yard beneath—arrivals—departures—the heavy omnibus rolling out to meet the train; and all the figures below indistinct in the summer twilight. "By Jove! if it keeps up like this there will be little sleep for me to-night," said Mr. Oldham, drawing near the window with the towel still in his hand; and it was just at this careless moment that *it* occurred.

Two people were talking immediately under the window. How it was that their conversation detached itself from the general din, he never could tell, unless it might happen to be the very peculiar tone of one of the voices, or the amount of passion and eagerness in their conversation; they

were quarrelling, that is to say, one was addressing a string of hurried reproaches to the other, who made little reply, but who, when he did speak, answered in a strange spasmodic kind of voice—a voice which seemed to catch upon special words, and clench the teeth on them. This was all Mr. Oldham heard, at least all he could swear to afterwards.

"You've betrayed every one as ever had to do with you," said the first speaker, "man or woman. But for you I might have had a house o' my own over my head 'stead o' being a helper here—and I never was wise and would learn, but trusted you over and over like a fool, because of the drop of blood that's atween us. Yes: you may sneer—its base i'me, as folks say—but it's the same blood, though I'm a helper about the 'Angel' stables, and you're—"

"It matters nothing what I am"— said the other—"I've always warned you, Jasper, to stick to your own business," and here the betraying voice gave a sudden clench and grind on the words; "and restrain your temper. Give me the address—I'll have you apprehended for kidnapping," and the teeth struck together again harshly, "if you don't deliver up that child to me. I have no time to trifle, you can reck-k-kon up your accounts another time. Where have you put him? Give me the address."

"Not if you was to kill me;" said the man. "I've got the child safe, poor innocent, and you sha'n't lay hands on it, no, not if you offered my weight in gold. I've got the upper hand o' you, and I'll keep it. No, it shall stay with me."

"Mind what you're saying," said the other: "I'm not sc-c-crupulous. Give it up, or—"

"You can do your worst; there's folks about, I ain't afeared of you," said the helper; and then Mr. Oldham was about to put down his towel —but at that moment a low stifled cry, a heavy dull fall, caught his ear; he threw up the window, and having nothing better at hand, threw down the towel upon the head of a man whom he saw darting out of the archway. "That's him!" shouted the excited listener. He made an attempt to get out of the window, but remembering in time that he was seventeen stone, rushed forth by the legitimate means of exit, only to lose himself in the long dark passage. When he got fairly in the way at last, he stumbled against one of his own party. "Aren't you coming to dinner, Oldham?" cried this astonished individual. "Dinner! it's murder," exclaimed the spectator of the tragedy. By the time he got outside, the bystanders were gathered in a wondering group round the fallen man, asking—what was it?—who did it? as bystanders will. Nobody knew anything about the matter. Mr. Oldham dashed into the midst of them, charging and dispersing the crowd by sheer native force and impetus—"Is he killed? poor fellow! poor fellow!" cried the incautious man. "And where's that

confounded scoundrel with the click in his voice? It's him that's done it —him I threw the towel on—Good Heavens! did you let him go?"—He had forced his way into the very centre of the ring beside the body. "What did he do it with—a knife?" cried Mr. Oldham, "and, God preserve me! there's my towel all dabbled in the poor wretch's blood! Is he dead? haven't you sent for a doctor?—and, Good Heavens! why did you let the fellow go?"

Such was the babble of horror and excitement which this imprudent man poured forth. He was taken up immediately by a dozen eager voices anxious to hear what he knew; and went through his story with many a wondering interjection, five or six times over, while the people about ran wildly to and fro, and doctors and police were sent for, and crazy persons went off through the streets in quest of a man whom nobody had seen. Mr. Oldham himself dashed out into the road, and gazed all round him, first on one hand and then on the other, as if he could, by the strain of his eyes, identify a person whose voice alone he had the least knowledge of. When the doctor came, the poor man was discovered to be breathing his last, killed, not by a knife, as Mr. Oldham supposed, but by a blow on the head, the sudden and extraordinary effect of which, the wondering surgeon could not account for. Mr. Oldham, though he could not help feeling now and then in vacant moments a pang of hunger, thought no more of his dinner. He told what he had heard over again to everybody who asked him; he was in a state of prodigious excitement, indignation, and horror. "A gentleman, sir—I feel sure a gentleman, by his voice, in spite of that click. I'd know that click again anywhere!" said the roused and emphatic Briton; and all the wondering groups in the "Angel" who were disturbed in their peaceful occupations or enjoyments by the frightful intelligence of a murder, were comforted at the same time by the information that "there was a gentleman as was a looking out of his window and see him"—"a gentleman as could identify the murderer"—"ay, and won't spare no pains either," others added. The household of the "Angel" was proud of a witness so willing and ready. Even the horror of the occurrence was all but outbalanced by the presence of a spectator who had been almost on the spot, and had heard the awful words preliminary to such an event. By the time Mr. Oldham could get back to his party, he found them making a disconsolate attempt to eat the cold dinner which had been so tragically interrupted. He had the glory, but they only the disadvantages. Most of them were sulky, none sympathetic. Instead of the eager welcome he had met with out of doors, his friends, who already knew the story, received him with great indifference: and did their best, as friends should, to pour cold water on his excitement and lessen his self-importance. "Had I been you, Oldham,

I'd have kept very quiet about it," said one: "it's unpleasant to have anything to do with a murder: ten to one but the popular voice a dozen years after this, when the story is told, makes you out as the culprit." "And not to speak of that," said another, "think of all the confounded bore! You'll be detained for the inquest, you'll be subpœnaed, you'll be cross-examined by some brute of a counsel till at last you really come to believe you did it yourself: not to speak of the loss of time." "And, my dear sir, you've lost flesh already!" said the senior of the party solemnly: they all gathered round him, looking with compassion upon this public-spirited Englishman. "Poor dear Mr. Oldham, I declare he *is* thinner," cried one little female spectator, with something between a giggle and a groan. The poor man fell suddenly from his excitement into a state of doleful anticipation: not that it was lamentable to "lose flesh," for perhaps he had a trifle too much of that commodity; but the other penalties thus held up over him, struck his soul into the depths. The lines of his jolly face grew limp and haggard. "Perhaps it would be best to steal away quietly to-morrow, and say nothing more about it," he faltered. "I am such an impulsive fool." "Not unless you wish to be set down as the murderer," said one of his friends, with amiable promptitude. "In that case it would be better not to communicate your intention to any of us, in case we should be called upon to state what we know," said another gravely. "Good Heavens! you don't mean to say you any of you think I did it?" said poor Oldham, driven half distracted—and the laughter that followed this question was not much comfort to him. He retired to rest after a while, in that horrid little room, with an awful sense that something had befallen him, something which he might perhaps never get clear of, and the issues of which were entirely beyond ordinary foresight. He slept a little, but dreamed more; and groaned in his disturbed rest, perhaps more painfully haunted by the dead man's looks than the murderer was. The result to the criminal, in this world at least, could only be hanging at the worst: but who could tell what unknown tortures it might involve to the innocent witness, who after all had so very little to testify?

CHAPTER II.

MR. OLDHAM, however, got off better than he hoped next day; very little except the fact of which there was another witness, whose solemn evidence nobody could dispute, could be made out by the awed and open-mouthed jurors at the inquest. The man was killed, that was indisputable. The testimony of the surgeon was to the effect that the blow, though murderous, could only have killed a man whose health was already weak and precarious; and Oldham bore his little bit of testimony with less

excitement than on the previous night. Nothing further could be discovered about the unknown manslayer. The fact that he had a singular peculiarity in his voice, was the only one that gave the slightest clue by which he might be discovered. And the ingenuity of the public was completely at fault. Jasper Tyrrel, the murdered man, was a stranger known to nobody; he had been at the "Angel" as helper in the stables, only for a few months. Another hanger-on about the hotel recollected vaguely that a gentleman had inquired after him some time before; somebody in whose service he had formerly been, the man thought; but that vague information was all that could be procured. The only other witness was an elderly hard-featured woman, who had already claimed his clothes and trifling belongings as his sister and only relation. This woman attracted the attention of Mr. Oldham, who had gradually grown to forget the possible penalties of his witness-ship, and had returned to his first eager interest in the matter. She was a woman of forty, very meagre, faded, and sombre in her aspect, but with a remarkable pair of stealthy black eyes, which looked as if they knew a great deal more about most things than her prim and demure speech acknowledged. The account she gave of her brother was a very reasonable and sober one. She knew of no mystery about him, or reason why he should be murdered by anybody. He had never been much good, poor fellow. He had the passion for betting which possesses, like a shadow of the vice of their betters, so many of his class. He had been in service, he had even "set up for himself" once, a long time ago—and had gradually sunk to be helper at the "Angel." She knew no gentleman with a defect in his voice that had a spite against him. "Nobody, I make bold to say, had any spite against him; he was a harmless creature," the woman said, not without a secret touch of contempt in her even voice. "And as for the talk about a child, she couldn't but think as the gentleman must ha' been dreaming." This insinuation, Mr. Oldham, whose temper was none of the mildest, had to bear as he might. He avenged himself by jumping at the conclusion that this yellow meagre creature, with her dangerous eyes, knew more about the business than she dared tell. But that was all that could be made out at the inquest. Mr. Oldham, who had lost his day's pleasuring, subsided into the sitting-room which had been occupied by the Serene Duchess of Hesse-Marabout, and pondered the matter in the glowing afternoon; not without a regretful note in his own mind as to whereabouts his companions might be "as now." Fanny Maidstone (who had observed last night that poor dear Mr. Oldham was getting thinner,) was an interesting little figure, even to a man of seventeen stone. He thought, with an indignant puff of angry breath, that the young fellows would have it all their own way to-day, though Fanny was a girl of sense, and knew that the mere arbitrary advantage of youth did not count for much, at least was far from

being everything. Mr. Oldham felt better after he had quaffed a golden draught of beer, which refreshed his soul—and then his thoughts returned to the public duty he had been performing. That woman—He resolved to go and ask after her, by way of consuming the time till his friends should return.

It was a fortunate idea. In answer to his question, he was shown into the housekeeper's room, where he found the sister of the murdered man. She was eagerly inspecting a quantity of trifling matters which had been taken from the poor fellow's pockets, examining particularly every scrap of paper, with intense stealthy curiosity. Mr. Oldham thought he saw a gleam of disappointment in her face. "You don't find what you're looking for?" he said.

The woman looked up and made him a defiant curtsey. "I'd have been disappointed if I'd looked for anything particular," she said; "but I knew Jasper, poor soul! too well for that. Nothing as would bring a shilling; he never knew how to buy a sensible article in his life. Look you here even, you as is curious;" and opening a poor little greasy purse lying among the other pitiful pathetic rubbish which yesterday had been the poor man's personal property, she shook it scornfully open to show its emptiness. As she did so a little bit of paper, the merest scrap, fluttered to the ground. She made a wild snatch at it, but too late, for Oldham who was very light in his movements, notwithstanding his size, had caught it before her. "Give it up to me this moment, sir. What was his is mine; it's my property. If you don't give it up this minute I'll call in the police," cried the woman; "it's a memorandum o' property, that's what it is; it's robbing me o' my just rights. Give me back the paper, or I'll take the law o' you," she cried, seizing his arm.

"I give you my word," said Oldham, holding the prize tight, "it is no memorandum about property; it is a simple address."

"And I tell you it's worth gold to me," cried poor Jasper's heir; then she corrected herself, casting murderous looks at the intruder from those dangerous stealthy eyes. "I mean it's the only guide he's left me to get my rights," said the woman, in the tone of one who felt she had made a false move. "It's none of your business, prying into a poor man's bits o' things—especially," she added, with a pretence at feeling which was wonderfully contradicted by the tearless gleam of her eyes, "of a poor murdered man, as you had something to do with his end."

"I something to do with his end?" cried Oldham; "but never mind, I see you mean to exasperate me. You sha'n't have this address. I'll give it over to the police. I tell you I suspect you already; you could tell more if you would; it's Providential!" said the impulsive man, wiping the moisture of exhaustion from his brow. "I call you to witness," he went on, turning to the landlord who had come in, all curious of new particulars, "that I won't give her this, and that I'm keeping it for the

ends of justice. It's not a bit of use saying any more. Oh, Coleman, you've come back. I didn't see you were there."

"I wish I had come back a little sooner," said Coleman, as his stout friend burst forth from the room, leaving the disappointed woman in a fury, making vain appeals to the landlord. "The ends of justice! What on earth do you mean? Are you going to make yourself judge and jury, or at least, public prosecutor? You seem to me to be taking the whole case on your shoulders. What *is* the matter now?"

"Well, you see, I suspect that woman," said Mr. Oldham, in a little confusion, once more wiping his troubled brow.

"Suspect the woman! Well, I daresay. She is downlooked and not satisfactory. I couldn't myself put her into a witness-box with any peace of mind," said his adviser, who was a lawyer: "but, Good Heavens, what have you to do with it? It's not so pleasant to help to hang a man, I can tell you, whatever you may think of the 'ends of justice.' What is this new aggravation you have got into now? Something you've found in the poor fellow's pockets? But what in the name of common-sense had *you* to do with that?"

Once more the lines of Mr. Oldham's face grew limp and haggard. He unfolded and spread out in his hand the villanous scrap of paper, on which was written in pencil in the scrawling handwriting of an uneducated person, the name of Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington. "Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington," he read out, having now reached the door of the Serene sitting-room, where all the party were waiting, impatient for the latest intelligence. "Now I ask anybody here," cried the excited witness, addressing the company, "whether it's in the nature of things to suppose that Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington, knows anything about this terrible murder, or whether she's a person to be handed over to the villanies of that woman downstairs? This is the address which that poor soul would not give up, and got his death for. There's something about an innocent child that has to be kept out of wicked hands, and you ask me what business it is of mine. What business is it of any man's to stop wickedness? Here's a virtuous woman and an innocent child—"

"The man's mad," cried his friend. "You know no more about the business than little Jack Horner. What is Miss Mead, Blossoms, to you? Give it up to the police, and come to dinner. If you go on like this you'll carve out business for yourself for all the rest of your life."

"Upon my word, I think you're very rash, Oldham," said another. "What's all this talk about a woman and a child? Depend upon it, you'll have bother enough with your own evidence, without taking anything else in hand. People will think you know more of it than you say, if you don't mind."

"And these agitations, my dear fellow, are very bad for your health,"

said a third. "A man of your size requires to be cautious. You have got a very queer colour already, I can tell you. You'll have to take care of yourself in this hot weather—and don't, for Heaven's sake, drink, when you're in that heated condition, such great draughts of beer."

"Poor dear Mr. Oldham is so public-spirited: it's such a pity he's so delicate," said Fanny, with a sunny glance of intelligence to one of those light young fellows who had made the best of his opportunity, and thrown poor Oldham into the shade. The poor man's countenance sank as he listened—he felt himself arrested as an accessary before the fact—he felt himself stricken down with sudden apoplexy as his friends delivered their opinions—he gave up the paper mutely to be taken to the police. Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington—he took a quiet opportunity when he went into that intolerable little room to prepare for dinner, to write it down in his own pocket-book. That, at least, could do nobody any harm.

But the address never got into the hands of the police. That particular one of the young fellows to whom the precious document had been committed, went out with his head full of Fanny Maidstone, and lighting his cigar as he went, in total defiance of all cautions about appetite and the near approach of dinner, inadvertently used for that purpose the scrap of paper which had caused so much commotion: and instead of sensibly turning back and saying nothing about it, trudged on all the same philosophically to the police-office, and told what had happened. The inspector who had charge of the case came down to the "Angel" the same evening to inquire into it. Then it was strange to find how entirely everybody had forgotten the address. No two of the party agreed upon the name, and not one had any clear conception of the place. The only person who had any real knowledge was silent as death, and kept his hand fast upon his breast-pocket, in which he kept the pocket-book where the name of Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington, was treasured up for future use. He was badgered with all sorts of questions, and the truth, a dozen times at least, was on the eve of bursting from his troubled lips. But by a supernatural effort of self-control he restrained himself. If Mr. Oldham had a weakness it was for the feebler and fairer half of humanity. Though he had come to be nearly fifty without marrying, it was not from any want of susceptibility: and here was an inducement sufficient, if any human inducement could be sufficient, to make the goodnatured man hold his tongue, and almost to conquer his propensity for revealing everything he knew. He dodged and evaded the questions addressed to him with a skill which awoke his friend Coleman's admiration and professional approval. "By Jove, Oldham, you are a fellow one might put in a witness-box without the usual certainty of living to be ashamed of you!" Coleman said. "Of course you knew all the time; whereabouts is it this old woman lives?"

"There is no evidence that she is an old woman," said Mr. Oldham warmly; "I shouldn't wonder if she turned out to be under five-and-twenty—which I think is the time of a woman's loveliest bloom," continued the artful man, casting a significant glance upon Fanny Maidstone, who was approaching that climax of female charms. But the young fellow who had burned the address was still making himself agreeable to Fanny. Mr. Oldham continued tartly, "You don't think I want to deceive her Majesty's officers of justice, I hope?"

"Oh no, no," said Coleman, amid ironical plaudits; and Mr. Oldham rose very materially in the estimation of the general company, as a man who successfully manages to conceal what he is thinking or feeling generally does in English society. His friends paid him much additional deference that night, because they were all tolerably sure that he had the name of Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington, laid up safely somewhere, and did not mean to expose that unknown woman to the cross-examinations of law. Even Mr. Oldham's old friends showed him more respect than usual on account of this gallant piece of reticence. But dreadful were the advices and prognostications showered on his devoted head. The party was to separate the next day, and every man had his advice to offer. One advised the public-spirited Briton to hurry off to France before he was subpœnaed, and escape the business altogether; another begged him to be careful that he was not seized upon by a detective and carried off against his will, in pursuit of the criminal whom he alone could identify. But Fanny Maidstone was the most cruel of all. She said, "I hope the lady will turn out pretty, and under five-and-twenty, Mr. Oldham," with a saucy little curtsey of dismissal; and turned from her elderly perturbed admirer to exchange a smile of intelligence with the young fellow who had made such good use of his time. Mr. Oldham retired to the odious little room which had brought him into all this trouble, heaving vast sighs of suffering and in a very sentimental mood. "'Twas ever thus from childhood's hour," sighed the stout man, like Dick Swiveller, as he got into bed—and lay there sleepless and feverish, pondering apoplexy and detectives for an hour at least—after which brief interval he remembered nothing more until he woke at half-past seven in the morning, under the provocation of an arrival in the yard, the coming in of the omnibus from the morning train—and saw with a mingled feeling of dissatisfaction and pleasure that his countenance had not paled, nor his comfortable bulk diminished. "I can't look sentimental whatever I do," sighed Fanny Maidstone's victim, as he went through the usual processes of the toilette—but, after all, there was a certain satisfaction in finding that he was likely to be able to set all evil auguries about his health at defiance.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN the party separated, Mr. Oldham went home; it had been rather an eventful journey to him. He went back to his snug little bachelor's residence at Fulham, with a feeling of annoyance yet importance, and a consciousness that justice and the world in general could no longer go on without him. He felt reluctant to go far from home for the first week or two, and left word particularly with his housekeeper where he meant to go to when he drove into town, in case he should be wanted. And it was rather surprising, almost in fact disappointing, to the excellent man to find that he was not wanted, and that having once heard his story fully, justice did not at present insist upon having anything more to do with him; the chance scraps of comment in the papers, and intimations that no clue had as yet been found to the criminal, gradually let down the momentary excitement of the public, and though time had the same effect upon the witness of the tragedy, it was with something like disappointment that he found week after week pass by without anything happening which had the least connexion with the matter. After all the evil auguries of his friends, and the importance with which these prognostications had invested him, to find nothing at all come of it was a little humbling to Mr. Oldham. Nothing at all, unless perhaps it might be one thing, which also was disappointing and annoying in its way. The young fellow who had it all his own way that day of the inquest, never lost the ground he had gained, and in less than three months Mr. Oldham was invited to Fanny Maidstone's marriage. He bore it very well on the whole, for hearts are seldom broken when they are contained within a body which weighs seventeen stone, but still he felt it; indirectly it proceeded from the frightful event which had interrupted his calm. But for the opportunities afforded by that day at Iffley when the elderly wooer was out of the way, who could say that a totally different conclusion might not have come to the little romance? As it was, nothing could be done but to "grin and bear it," which characteristic piece of English philosophy Mr. Oldham accordingly adopted. The marriage took place at Richmond, where the Maidstones lived. It was a lovely September evening, when all being over, he unpinned the favour from his coat, and with a light step but a heavy heart, heaving some huge sighs into the pleasant twilight, went to the railway station to return to town. He had driven from Fulham in the morning, but had an engagement, as it happened, with some of the few lonely individuals then remaining in London, for that evening, and had resolved to go up by railway. Sauntering languidly among the crowd on the platform, Mr. Oldham awaited the train which was just then expected. He was

thinking, if anybody had asked him the question, about nothing in particular; perhaps musing over the perversity of things in general, and of young women and Fanny Maidstone in particular. Her name now was Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Algernon Smith it is true, but still Mrs. Smith lost in an undistinguishable crowd of Mrs. Smiths out of which there never would be any possibility of identifying her. Well! it was a kind of vague consolation to feel that in that respect at least she might have done better. Mr. Oldham heaved a great sigh as he put his foot on the step of the carriage to enter: just at that moment a sudden gust of talking came to his ear from the next compartment, where some sporting men coming up from Epsom were putting all railway laws at utter defiance and smoking openly. What the others said, Mr. Oldham neither heard nor cared; but through the hum of different tongues, he heard the clash and grind of the teeth, the strange jar of the voice which he had heard but once before in his life. "I don't reck-k-ollect anything about it," it said. Mr. Oldham woke up out of his musing with a sudden start. He fell back from the carriage he had half entered as if he had been shot, and rushed to the door of the next division. "No room here," "quite full here," said one after another of the occupants, with that instinctive jealousy of a new travelling companion which is common to the English traveller. Mr. Oldham appealed to the guard, and insisted upon getting in. "I want to smoke my cigar," said the unfortunate man, who never could smoke a cigar in his life. "Don't allow smoking in the carriages," said that functionary, "plenty of room, sir, in the next compartment." The precious moments ran on, while Mr. Oldham in his bridal costume stood at the door of the carriage which all the occupants by a simultaneous impulse were defending. He grew excited about it, like a true Englishman. "There's a vacant seat, and here's my ticket, and I have a right to any seat in the train I choose," he said, keeping an anxious ear upon his opponents inside. They seemed to be all talking at once, Mr. Oldham thought, but there was no second sound of the voice. Could it be in another carriage after all? He fell back for an instant to listen, and in that instant was hustled into the next compartment by a watchful porter. He went up to town with his head out of window all the way, not without serious damage to his eyes from dust and flying cinders. When they reached town he was the first to jump out, while the train was still in motion; he watched every man out of that next carriage, he followed their noisy progress to the cabs in which they drove away in pairs; he could scarcely be deceived this time. He felt sure every one of them had spoken, but the voice was certainly not among them; and so with a sense of having missed his chance, he was at length reluctantly compelled to get into the last lingering Hansom and leave the station. At his friend's where he was going, he could talk of nothing else all the

night. What could it be—delusion? Or could the culprit have taken fright at his persistent attempt to enter, and disguised his voice, or kept silent? The lingering solitaries who abode like anchorites in the desert, in the London of September, thought poor Oldham a bore that night. "He does nothing but talk of that confounded murder of his—I suppose he must have done it himself," said his fatigued host; and the other languid guests voted the stout man a nuisance. He drove home to Fulham with the voice ringing in his ears, never able to get rid of it. It was the beginning of his troubles.

CHAPTER IV.

THIS strange accident brought back in all its first vigour Mr. Oldham's excitement. He went about next day with open ears, listening like a virtuous eavesdropper to every scrap of conversation he could pick up in the streets. The voice pursued him; he made a little expedition to Tattersall's to see if he could discover any of his fellow-travellers of the evening in that classic resort. He drove the few men who dropped disconsolately during the afternoon into his deserted club, half mad with his talk. In short, he did all he could to nourish to the length of an active conspiracy the smouldering anxiety which began to arise among his friends to have him arrested and hanged for this endless murder; and try whether it was possible by such a violent remedy to have done with it. When he tired of these occupations, Mr. Oldham went back again to Fulham, quite prepared to hear that anything had happened. It was, however, a very mild and commonplace sort of incident which had come to pass during his absence. Two ladies had called, his housekeeper told him, two ladies who would not leave their names, but would call again to-morrow morning,—"I think it's some of them as are always a collecting for somethink!" said Mrs. Stocks; "not as I can ever remember to have set eyes on them before, but there's always new folks a coming to a place as is near town." Mr. Oldham, however, had no faith in this hypothesis. He could not think of anything that was entirely unconnected with the subject of his present anxiety. They must have something to do with it, though he could not tell what. Certainly up to this moment no lady had appeared to be involved in this dreadful business; but Mr. Oldham was discriminating enough to know that women are mixed up with most things in this world, and old bachelor enough to say that they were at the bottom of all mischief; certainly these unknown visitors must have something to do with it. He waited in, in the morning, in rather solemn state, having bestowed more pains on his dress, and brushed his hair more carefully than usual. Whatever they might happen to be, they were women, and a man owed it to himself to look as respectable as possible in presence of such visitors. When he had seated himself in

his library after breakfast to wait for them, he bethought himself of the address in his pocket-book, and taking it out read it over. Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington—a fragrant, honeyed name, the very sound of which would beguile the bees and butterflies,—could it be she who was coming to see him, and if it was, what could she want? He still had the pocket-book in his hand, when he heard a knock at the door, and had only time to put it up hastily, when his housekeeper announced Mrs. Lambert and Mrs. Forrester, and showed the two ladies into his bachelor room.

One of them was a young widow, in deep crape and sombre veil; the other a hearty, cheerful, middle-aged woman, in moderate colours, which looked bright against the black. The first sat down timidly on the seat Mr. Oldham offered her, and put back her veil from a pale, anxious, frightened, but still pretty face. The other drew forward a chair for herself to the table, and faced the master of the house with composure. They had not exactly the air of ladies—at least the elder sister did not possess that indescribable aspect; she looked a ready, prompt, good-humoured woman of business. Perhaps, Mr. Oldham thought, with some disappointment, it was only about subscriptions, after all.

"We came to ask you about that dreadful thing that happened at the 'Angel';" said the elder of the two: "I hope, sir, you won't take it amiss, though we are strangers; but the fact is, there is something mentioned in the papers about a lost child, and my sister has lost her child, and we thought it just possible it might be the same. If you wouldn't mind telling us what you know?"

"Did Mrs.—the lady—your sister, live in that quarter?" said Oldham, a little confused, turning his eyes from one to the other, and not knowing exactly which to address.

"Well no—I can't say she did; but so far as we know she's got a cunning enemy to deal with, the cunningest I ever heard of;" said the elder woman. "To tell you the truth, sir, my sister married a good deal above her station; we were well-to-do, but weren't gentlefolks—"

"Oh Mary, never mind about that, let us first hear about the child—if the gentleman knows anything about my child!" said the widow, clasping her hands.

"To be sure, dear, to be sure," said the other; "she married above her station as I say, and her husband's dead, poor fellow, and it's come to a trial, which I daresay you have seen in the papers. His father wanted to take the baby out of her hands, you know, and she wouldn't give it up, and the Chancellor wouldn't take it from her. It's Lambert *versus* Lambert, as I daresay you've seen in the papers. He's Sir Joseph Lambert, you know; and since it was given in her favour her child's disappeared. We're all of the opinion it's been stolen by its grandfather. I don't know, for my own part, how the murder can have to do

with it; but if you have heard anything about the child, please, sir, to let us hear."

The poor little widow, whose veil always dropped over her frightened face and had to be put back, again clasped her hands in supplication. Mr. Oldham was much moved—he did not know what to say.

"I will tell you all I heard, but that was not much," he said. "The murderer said, 'Give up the address—tell me where the child is'—and the man who was killed refused. Perhaps, on the whole," said Mr. Oldham with candour, "it is wrong to say the murderer, for it might be only manslaughter. The poor man said, 'I've got the child safe, poor innocent, and you sha'n't lay hands upon it—not if you offered its weight in gold'—and that was apparently the reason of the sudden blow. Perhaps you can tell me something about the man you suspect—has he—anything particular—about his voice?"

"Sir Joseph? Oh bless you, my poor sister never saw him," said Mrs. Forrester; "he wouldn't look at Mr. Lambert, nor so much as receive his letters after he married poor Ellen—"

"Mary!" said the little widow in a tone of remonstrance—"but oh, sir, what more was there about the child?"

"Well—nothing more—" said Mr. Oldham, in some confusion—then he paused and looked from one to the other, and mentally made up his mind that women were never to be trusted with anything in the shape of a secret. It was rather strange, too, that he should take so much involuntary interest in preserving this unknown Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington, from annoyance. "Nothing more," repeated the troubled man. Here the poor little widow burst into a flood of tears—she had been watching his eye, his looks, every movement he made; evidently some hope had been rising in her mind. She sank back in her chair in an utter prostration and hopelessness which went to the heart of the goodnatured man. "Oh, Mary, take me away, take me away! I don't care where I go to now—I shall never find my child!" said the poor little heartbroken soul. Mr. Oldham hastened away to bring her a glass of water, quite overpowered with sympathy. "Poor little woman," he said to himself—and sending his housekeeper in with the water, went to the cellar himself to bring up a bottle of rare Tokay on which he greatly prided himself. When he got back with the wine, she was tying her bonnet-strings again and preparing to depart. "I am sure we are very much obliged to you," said the cheerful sister, whose ruddy countenance was overcast in sympathy. "Ellen, dear, say so yourself; —and sorry to have given you so much trouble: but you see it's her only child—and she came back from Pau all this way when she saw it in the papers about there being a child mentioned. Poor dear! Don't fret, Ellen darling, you'll find him yet; a child can't be hidden away like a watch or a piece of money—and I am sure, sir, we are much obliged to you."

"Stay a moment," said Mr. Oldham, who had been drawing the cork of his precious bottle. He went and closed the door, and made sure Mrs. Stocks was out of hearing: "Stay a moment. To tell you the truth I have a clue, I think I have a clue to the—the lady with whom this poor murdered man deposited the child. It may be fancy, but I think—I can't help thinking I have a clue;—wait a little," he said, addressing the poor mother, who had started into immediate excitement, "wait a little," he continued, retreating and waving his hand to Mrs. Forrester, the sister, who was advancing upon him. "It may be all fancy, but still I imagine I have a clue. There was an address found of a lady—upon my word I don't know what to say to you, it may be all nonsense—but I did make a note of the address."

"Where is it—where is it? Oh, even suppose it's a disappointment, it's a comfort to her poor mind to feel that she is doing something!" said the sister, while the widow merely again clasped her hands, and looked at him with eyes of tearful supplication—"after all, you know, it might be Ellen's child as well as another, and Sir Joseph, by all we can hear, is bad enough for anything—and oh, sir, if you will take pity upon us, tell us where it is!"

Once more, Mr. Oldham looked at the agitated women before him. To give them the address was easy enough, but then how if it got to the ears of the police people, from whom all this time he had been defending the unknown Miss Mead? It was as good as publishing it at once in the papers to give it to these women. Besides, he did not like to let this matter out of his own hands. He could not explain to himself his reluctance about it. Never was a goodnatured man in a greater strait. He could not withhold a scrap of comfort, however problematical, from the poor little weeping mother: and what was he to do? At last he propounded the only expedient possible, as he offered the agitated widow that glass of Tokay.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Mr. Oldham, "I'll go myself and inquire into it. I couldn't give you the address—it would be a kind of—breach of trust, you see. I couldn't do it, but if you will trust me, and come back—say in a fortnight—that is in a week—I mean—well, perhaps the day after to-morrow—I'll go myself and inquire into it. I will really—I give you my word. But," said the impulsive man, holding up his hand to stay the torrent of thanks which began to be poured forth upon him; "don't hope too much, it may be all fancy; indeed the chances are it *is* all fancy; nothing may come of it; however, if you'll trust me I'll make the fullest inquiries. You must give me some particulars, however, about the child—what it looks like and how it was dressed, and so on—and how old it is, and what is its name. I suppose there might be a chance of my recognising it," said Mr. Oldham doubtfully, looking in the face of his elder visitor with a certain helplessness, "if I was told all that?"

"Oh, bless you, a man never can tell one baby from another—if I were to go with you? perhaps," said that sensible woman—"No?—well, if you have reasons against it, it's not our part to say a word when you are taking so much trouble. Oh, we can tell you every particular about the darling! Ellen, rouse up, dear, and tell the gentleman, since he is so very good. He'll be two years old if he lives till the fifteenth of next month—and he's the sweetest little angel you ever set eyes on. He has blue eyes, and beautiful curling hair, like gold, and—"

But it would be vain to attempt to record the catalogue of baby charms that followed. Poor Mr. Oldham made vain attempts to note them down in his pocket-book—beside Miss Mead's name—but soon got utterly bewildered, and came to a pause in hopeless confusion. "All babies have blue eyes," said the puzzled bachelor. "Two years old, name Charlie—knew his name as well as anything—could say Mamma, and doggie, and—yes, I think that'll do. Wore a white frock and a—what? braided French-grey pelisse—what's French-grey?—never mind, I daresay that will do. It's a good way off," said Mr. Oldham, with a faint remonstrance in his voice, "and the day after to-morrow is a very short time to give me. What did the poor lady say?—it's a very long time to her?—ah yes, I daresay it is—I have no doubt it is. Her only child did you say? My dear Madam," said the good-hearted and impulsive man, "I'll do my best for you, don't be afraid. If there's a baby to be had I'll bring it; but don't build too much on it, either," he added with an effort to tone down the excitement of the party in general, "Its very likely nothing will come of it. It may be all a mistake for anything I can tell. You must not put too much faith in me."

"Oh, sir, I will pray for you all my life!" said the poor little widow, following her buxom sister, a forlorn little black figure, through Mr. Oldham's sunny garden to the cab which waited outside. He stood looking after them with quite a generous excitement in his kind heart. "Poor little soul! I daresay if I picked up a baby anywhere, and dressed it in—what did she call it?—French blue?—she'd never know the difference," said the ignorant man. "Good heavens! what's that?" Mr. Oldham rushed to his garden gate and threw it wildly open—he looked up and down the quiet sunny road, and could not see a soul stirring except the butcher and the baker briskly circulating from door to door. "You, fellow, what was that you were saying?" said the excited listener, pouncing upon that last peaceful functionary, as he came by floury and cheerful, with his basket on his arm. The indignant youth naturally replied in choice cockney with fluent utterance—so did the butcher boy, who came up immediately with lively interest. Could it be the cabman, could it be something in the air—or where in the name of everything wonderful had it come from? the mocking, teasing, momentary sound of that diabolical voice!

A STORY OF A VOICE.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

PART II.

CHAPTER V.

MR. OLDHAM went down to Chester by the express train that night. Anxious as he was to fulfil his charitable mission, and not without a thrill of curiosity which was purely personal, a man who weighs seventeen stone owes some duties to himself which must not be neglected. When he got so far on his journey, he felt it necessary to pause and refresh himself; not to say that to land at Beddington, where perhaps, for anything Mr. Oldham knew, there was no inn, at midnight, would have been an unprofitable proceeding. So the good man picked up his carpet-bag with a slight shiver—for he had fallen asleep between Shrewsbury and Chester, and the night air was cold—and got into the omnibus which was going to the "Star." He roused up a little as he jolted through the streets, and began to talk with a fellow-passenger in his open way. He had never gone on a secret enterprise before, and he did not understand how to do it. He told the man who was sitting opposite, that he was going to Beddington next morning, and could he tell him how far it was, and did he know the people there? The man whom Mr. Oldham addressed thus confidentially was of course a bagman, and knew nobody but the waiters at the "Star," and the shopkeepers who gave him orders; and Mr. Oldham naturally proceeded to inform the company that he, too, was quite ignorant of the country, and knew nobody thereabout. There was a woman sitting by the door of the omnibus whom he did not notice much, one of those wrapped-up stealthy figures, in a faded shawl and gauze veil, which are to be seen everywhere. Somehow, as she went out, which was before they reached the hotel, it struck Mr. Oldham that he had seen the figure before; but it was totally unimportant, and he thought no more of it. Nobody had ever watched him or his proceedings up to this point in his life, and he knew no reason why they should do it now. Nevertheless, when he got down at the hotel, he caught a side-glance from a pair of hungry eyes, which he could not forget easily. The owner was a poor girl with a shawl over her head, who stood in a corner near the door of the inn, watching the passengers. Mr. Oldham grew a little nervous as he entered at the open door. Not that he had ever seen this face before, but the eyes gleamed at him in their hungry way, as tiger-eyes might gleam at the unconscious animal which was to be the next meal. Besides, the excellent man was cold and shivery from natural causes. When he had supped, his sensations were more comfortable, and he had a very nice bedroom at the "Star," very different from that

ill-fated little room at the "Angel," in which all his trouble began. "If I had had the sense to stay at home, it never could have happened," Mr. Oldham said to himself, and he heaved a decorous sigh at the recollection of Fanny Maidstone. But on the whole it must be allowed he had no particular wish that it had never happened. He took out his pocket-book before he went to bed, and read the name of the lady he was going to see, not without a smile of expectation. Miss Mead, Blossoms; after all, if she should happen to be five-and-twenty, and pretty?—Mr. Oldham tucked himself into the comfortable bed that awaited him, and went to sleep with a smile.

Next morning he had a very good breakfast, and went out early to get the first train. There was certainly a woman in a second-class carriage which he passed on his way to find a seat for himself, very like the woman in the omnibus last night. But then who *was* the woman in the omnibus last night?—He knew nobody at Chester, and to be sure that kind of woman was a common enough sight both in town and country, a woman in an indescribable shawl, which had been all sorts of colours, and was now no colour at all, and a thick veil on a shabby bonnet. Not the sort of person to awaken curiosity in the most susceptible bosom. Mr. Oldham established himself in his corner with a little pleasurable excitement, and forgot his momentary sensation of wonder. Now he was on his way to the discovery of this pleasant mystery. "Miss Mead, Blossoms;"—perhaps he had said it aloud in momentary inadvertence in the noise of the departure, for somebody opposite to him looked up quickly, with a pair of sweet blue eyes. He did not know what response to make to the evident question that was addressed to him by those mild orbs. He only grew confused, and looked out of the carriage window, and said, "a pretty country," in a bewildered voice; upon which the owner of the eyes, evidently concluding herself mistaken, smiled and looked down again upon her book, and left Mr. Oldham at liberty.

There were only three people in the carriage; she, himself, and a third person, a queer little man, muffled up in an immense red and blue cravat which covered his ears, who had come in after Mr. Oldham took his seat. The lady was—not five-and-twenty; no—nearer five-and-forty, it is to be feared. But still Mr. Oldham, who was, as we have already described, susceptible, could not refrain from a shy glance occasionally at the quiet face opposite. He thought first, what a resplendent complexion she must have had when she was a girl; then he thought what a sweet innocent life she must have led to keep her bloom so bright; then it occurred to him that, after all, he was not so very young himself, and he wondered did *he* wear as well; and then he fell into speculations as to what age she might be—over forty?—well, perhaps thereabouts, or probably just under that line; yes, looking at her

again, the bloom was so genuine, the outlines so delicate—here the lady looked up and caught Mr. Oldham, who blushed crimson, and murmured something inarticulate about begging her pardon. He was so confused and distressed, that her sympathy was enlisted, and she made a little bustle by way of collecting her shawl, her basket, and her parasol, to relieve his embarrassment. A woman is no longer afraid of any troublesome results following a chance gaze of admiration when she is over forty: and this, Mr. Oldham thought, was clearly a very sweet woman, careful of other people's feelings. He picked up her parasol for her with anxious zeal, and recovering himself, with a little curiosity to know where she was going, asked what was the name of the next station, and could she tell him when they would reach Beddington? Upon which the blue eyes looked up again, with a little surprise, to Mr. Oldham's face.

"Beddington is the next station," she said, putting up her book into her basket, and glancing at him with the air of one who expects another question; clearly, her curiosity was excited too.

"Bless me!" said Mr. Oldham. "Am I right in supposing you are going there? Perhaps you would have the goodness to assist me—to let me know—to give me some information about a lady—"

"I know everybody in Beddington," she said, with a pleasant little nod of her head. Her hair was a little grey to be sure, but somehow the soft tones of colour in her face did not lose by it; and Mr. Oldham began to feel that extremely sensitive heart of his thump slightly against his ample bosom.

"The—the circumstances are a little peculiar," he said. "I have not the pleasure of being acquainted with the lady myself. In fact, I have become involved in the business in a very strange, I may say in a—a painful manner," said Mr. Oldham, pausing to look troubled, and call forth his companion's sympathy; for the fact was, he had a natural faculty for appealing to everybody's sympathy, notwithstanding his unromantic appearance and his seventeen stone.

"Dear, dear, this grows exciting!" said the lady. "It looks as if it might be a mystery, and I never knew of any mystery in Beddington, though I have lived there—well it doesn't matter how many years. I dare say I know the lady, if you will tell me what is her name."

Mr. Oldham was a little confused by this direct question. He had an unconquerable repugnance to uttering the name which had been his secret for so long. He glanced over at the little man in the cravat, and it occurred to him that the sharp eyes looked as if they were listening; accordingly he drew out his pocket-book, opened it slowly, found the page, and after pondering over it for a moment, tore out the portion which contained Miss Mead's address. "There," said Mr. Oldham, not without a sensation of timidity—"that is the lady's name."

His companion put up a double eyeglass, shaking back her pretty grey ringlets with the smile of half-conscious fascination which never forsakes a woman who has been a beauty in her youth. But when she looked at the alarming bit of paper, she let the glass fall from one hand, dropped her basket out of the other, sat bolt upright in her corner, and turned a blanched face towards the alarmed spectator. "In the name of Heaven, what do you want with *me?*" cried the lady with a suppressed scream. Mr. Oldham shrank back into his corner as if he had received a blow.

"You!" cried the unaccustomed dealer in mysteries; and a kind of dissolving view formed before his eyes, the Miss Mead who was five-and-twenty gradually dispersing into thin air, through which the amazed face opposite gradually reappeared. "You!" Between bewilderment, and dismay, and an odd kind of pleasure, Mr. Oldham was not quite sure what he said.

"Yes, me;—*that's* me," said the lady, with a little peremptory nod this time; "what in the world does any man coming in this mysterious kind of way want with me?—I can't tell in the least what to make of it!—What has happened? All the trouble has come that could come," she ran on, in her low hurried voice. "I've nobody at a distance to be frightened for: but Good Heavens! one can never tell. What is it, for all the world? I shall go out of my wits if you don't say!"

"It's no harm, my dear lady, no harm," cried poor Mr. Oldham. "I didn't mean to agitate you. Of course I couldn't mean to agitate you when I did not know it was you," said the poor man, getting confused and explanatory; "if I had known it was you I never would have said what I did."

"Oh dear, dear, if the man would only say what it is," cried Miss Mead, "and not stare like a ninny at me!" And then she laughed at him frankly, with the sweetest old laugh—no, not old—or at least either old or young, but not middle-aged, which was what the little lady really was. "I wish you would come to the point and tell me what it is; a man is as bad as fifty women when he gets into a muddle," she said, with a comical puzzled look; "but there's nobody now one can have any bad news about, thank God!" This was said with something between a smile and a sigh, which betrayed that there had once been a very different state of affairs. "At one time I should have been frightened out of my senses; and tell me quickly, please, now."

Mr. Oldham leant across the carriage, with a suspicion, which he could not explain, of the little man in the cravat, who had wonderfully sharp, ugly eyes, to be sure. The benevolent traveller made the carriage creak and sway a little as he leant across. "Don't be alarmed ma'am, I entreat—it's about the child," said Mr. Oldham, in a very thrilling whisper. The chances are if he had spoken out loud, he would have

been much less distinctly audible. He attempted some wonderful pantomime at the same time, to show the need of caution, but became slightly dismayed when he saw the utter wonder in the lady's face.

"The child?" she repeated, with a perplexed look; "what child?" and here she came to a dead pause, and looked at Mr. Oldham. Could he be an impostor, meaning to trick her somehow? But the looks of that respectable and public-spirited Briton were certainly in his favour. Miss Mead was a clever woman, and thought herself quite incapable of being deceived in a face. "I would not trust the man in the cravat, not the breadth of a straw," she said to herself; "but this one—!" This one, meanwhile, felt himself put on his trial, and looked like any convicted culprit. He got quite limp and haggard under that awful ordeal. He did not even feel quite sure that he had not himself killed the poor helper at the "Angel," and stolen the memorandum out of his pocket-book; or that he was not an ogre going to eat up "the child" for breakfast. Just at this terrible crisis the train stopped. Mr. Oldham got out humbly to help his fellow traveller to alight, and was a little re-assured when she put her basket into his hand. "If you are going to see me, I dare say you will be so kind as to carry *that* for me," she said; and descended nimbly with her small feet, almost before he could offer his hand. Mr. Oldham was so bewildered to find himself, five minutes after this, walking along a pretty country road, with Miss Mead's basket in his hand, and Miss Mead herself beside him, that he never looked back to see what became of the man in the cravat, who had betrayed a certain fidgetiness, as if he intended alighting at Beddington too;—other matters of a more agreeable as well as more important kind occupied the attention of our traveller. Miss Mead was not tall, a charming little figure; it was only when you looked in her face that you discovered she was no longer young; and somehow age suited the face, which was still so sweet in colour and soft of outline. All this, of course, might have appeared different to Mr. Oldham had he himself been five-and-twenty, but even by heroes of that tender age, the soft old loveliness of Miss Mead had been found very attractive; not that she pretended to any sort of juvenility—rather the reverse, in fact—but she had a perception of the things and colours that became her, such as most pretty women attain to, after their youth is over, even if the knowledge does not come by nature. Mr. Oldham told her his story as they went up the lane together, through the lovely fragrant country, with fields of rich Cheshire pasture on either hand, behind the hedgerows, and the breath of balmy kine pervading the air. Miss Mead listened with a wondering countenance and growing interest. When he came to the finding of her address, she interrupted him in her lively way:

"I know what it means—it is all right; I understand about the child," said Miss Mead. "This is how it is;—my old maid, Jenny

Brown, who was so stupid as to marry, came back upon my hands a few years ago, and I gave her my little cottage, you know—that is to say, you don't know, but that doesn't matter—and a few months ago she took charge of a little child. I forget who recommended her, or where the baby came from; it's a nice little thing, I saw it this morning. It looks like a gentleman's child, to be sure—but it doesn't do to ask too many questions, you know, and Jenny was pleased enough to get it. She went and fetched it from Chester; it's a little boy—yes, to be sure—called Charlie—I dare say it's the same;—what's the matter?—What does that wretched little man in the cravat want in that field? It's my field. My good man," said Miss Mead, mounting nimbly upon the first step of a stile, which afforded a glimpse of their fellow-traveller, keeping parallel with them in a suspicious manner, behind the hedge,—"perhaps you are not aware that there is a bull in this field?"

The stranger made a hasty inarticulate exclamation within his cravat, but it was evident he did not relish the information; he came towards the stile at a suddenly accelerated pace, quickened still further by the appearance of some alarming object at the other end of the field. Miss Mead stood by, and, in consequence, so did Mr. Oldham, as the little man stumbled precipitately over the stile. He was plainly an uncivil little man; he took off his hat in a sullen way to the lady, but glared at her good-natured companion—who would have rushed to his rescue had the bull appeared—and did not say a syllable of thanks as he slunk away. He went off, as was natural, in the opposite direction. "I wonder was he listening to our conversation?" said Mr. Oldham, looking after him with a little curiosity; and, indignant as his natural temper would have made him at the idea of an eavesdropper on any other occasion, the hero of the present adventure felt that a clandestine listener was rather consonant than otherwise with the importance of his mission.

"Listening?—to what?" said Miss Mead, who had not gone through the same process of excitement. "I don't advise anybody to attempt that in a field of mine. Besides, what was there to listen for? A child stolen, it appears; but not out of this county, or belonging to anybody within reach; and as for supposing that any mystery could connect itself with me——"

"My dear madam!" said Mr. Oldham appealingly; "there may be some emissary within hearing—"

"Some emissary!"—Miss Mead opened her blue eyes wide upon him, till the astonished man fell back in dismay; they twinkled and danced with laughter, though they were old eyes—"Well, never mind, tell me the rest—about the pretty widow, you know," she said, with a significant little nod of her head. She had sharp eyes for a rural lady. She saw not only all about it, but a little more than there was

to see; and immediately suspected, as women will, some secret interest in the child's mother, as a motive for the present journey.

"About the widow?" said Mr. Oldham. "Poor little thing!—perhaps it would have been more sensible to send her down herself to see if it was her child. Do you think there is any difference between one child and another at so early an age? But the truth is," said the stout man, not without a blush, "I thought the child was in your personal care, and I feared if I gave her your name that it might turn out—ah—perhaps—troublesome to you."

"I don't know how it could be troublesome to me," said Miss Mead, with a quick glance—"but it was very considerate of you, and I am sure I am much obliged to you. This is the gate of *my* house. We can go to Jenny's cottage first, and then I trust you will come to The Blossoms to luncheon. Did you know any of my family, that you are so good as to think of saving me trouble?" she continued, once more turning round to look at him. "Perhaps you thought me not so—experienced a woman as you find me?" and the blue eyes laughed, looking younger than five-and-twenty, with a world of merry and saucy meanings, in his surprised countenance. Mr. Oldham did not at all know what to make of it. He had not expected to find so—experienced a woman—but then there were sundry other things for which he was entirely unprepared. The Blossoms was not a country cottage, but a pretty Manor House, faintly visible through a long umbrageous avenue; and though its mistress was more than forty, she had been a great beauty in her day, and had lost none of the ways of that marvellous inheritance. Her pretty grey ringlets stirred softly on the sweet bloom of her cheeks, as she stood watching him with an amused inquisitive look—making out an ingenious little theory of her own, partly right and partly wrong, as was natural. She did not quite comprehend his present confusion, and had not the least idea that the stout champion had kept her name from uncomfortable implication in the ugly story of a murder. Quick as her wits were, she had not yet attained to a due perception of all the circumstances, nor begun to reflect that her name in the possession of a man who had been killed was highly unpleasant, to say the least of it. Accordingly her reading of Mr. Oldham's embarrassed and somewhat troubled looks, was, in a considerable degree, a wrong reading. She took him to Jenny Brown's cottage, where he saw the baby, and contemplated the same with puzzled eyes. Jenny was very ready to show the pelisse, which indeed was getting somewhat shabby by this time, but neither she nor her mistress could make out the description which, according to Mr. Oldham, the poor mother had given of it. The two women looked at each other, and broke forth into laughter when he gave his hesitating report. Miss Mead, with a silvery ver-

flow of sound, which somehow pleased, even while it disconcerted, the impulsive man. And then what was he to do? Compassion had impelled Mr. Oldham to this enterprise without much time for thought, but it was, perhaps, the hardest of all his experiences. He sat down, not without some difficulty, in a curiously low chair, which, to his confusion, he found to be a rocking-chair, and held out his arms to the child. "Will you come to me, Charlie?" he said, in his softest voice, blushing fiery red, and feeling as if he never could, by any means, get up again. But Charlie paid no attention to the voice of the charmer. And even supposing Jenny to be willing to part with her nursling, and no other difficulty to interpose, how could he get that terrible baby conveyed to Fulham—and what on earth would people think of him, if he managed to convey it there? Heavy dews stood upon Mr. Oldham's forehead at the thought. He cast a look of despair at the little lady about whom he had indulged so many errant imaginations. Miss Mead, Blossoms, was still looking at him with lively female curiosity, making him out. The eyes of the stout but perplexed Quixote fell embarrassed before her amused inspection. He got up after two or three unsuccessful efforts, from the treacherous little rocking-chair. "To tell the truth, I don't understand babies," said Mr. Oldham, with a sigh of perplexity—and Miss Mead, whose curiosity grew upon her, carried him off to The Blossoms to luncheon, with an amount of amusement which it took all her good-breeding to repress.

The house was very pretty, and the luncheon admirable; and Mr. Oldham was moved to a little enthusiasm over the Madeira, which was above praise. Miss Mead had a pretty niece staying with her, it appeared, and a nephew or two about—and the talk of the little company naturally divulged the existence of a Squire Mead, who was to his maiden sister what the Hall was to The Blossoms. But these facts were apprehended by the stranger only by degrees, as he came to think of them. The principal thing that occupied Mr. Oldham, after his own perplexity, was Miss Mead herself, who was still prettier without her bonnet. When the young people had strayed out of those open windows, and the mistress of the house had seduced her guest into another final glass of Madeira, the two sat talking over all this strange story again, in a confidential way which was very charming and soothing to Mr. Oldham. As she elicited the entire truth by her skilful questions, Miss Mead came to see how much she was obliged to her unexpected visitor—and expressed her sentiments frankly, as a woman may do at her age.

"It was very good of you, I am sure. I begin to think you must be a new Quixote, a deliverer of the distressed," said the little lady; and Mr. Oldham blushed and stammered in an unexampled way as he received the compliment.

"It was all my bad luck," said the innocent man; "at least it would have been bad luck if it had not brought me acquainted—but then there's this baby," said Mr. Oldham, with a groan; and notwithstanding her gratitude, Miss Mead laughed at the inferior creature in the depths of its perplexity.

"We must not do anything rashly," she said, with the pleasantest look of wisdom in her mirth. "Jenny was paid three months in advance, and the time is just up, she tells me. I will write to the agent in Chester, and inquire about it. She could not give the baby up to you, you know, at a moment's notice, even if you understood about babies;" and she wound up with a laugh which did not sound at all like ridicule to Mr. Oldham's anxious ears.

"But that poor little mother?" he said.

"Ah, the poor little mother!" said Miss Mead. "I think you had better send her down to me, and I'll ascertain all the rights of it. You could not inquire into that, of course, but I will. That Sir Joseph Lambert is a great rascal—I knew his second poor wife—and he was an ugly little shabby wretch like——upon my word, like that little man in the cravat!" said the little lady of The Blossoms. "I wonder who that was? But you may rely upon my help, you who have been so good to me."

"Oh no, not at all," said Mr. Oldham, and so the talk went on. When he went away, an hour, or perhaps more than an hour later, Mr. Oldham was far from being sure that the terrible accident which had fallen into his life was not rather a lucky chance than otherwise, so far as he was personally concerned. The poor man at the "Angel" to be sure had the worst of it; but that was no fault of Mr. Oldham's. He sauntered down the shady avenue with a sensation of pleasant excitement, thinking over all that had happened. He thought that on the whole, perhaps it would be as well for him to bring little Mrs. Lambert down, in case of anything happening to her on the way. He thought Miss Mead was a very charming woman—not quite young, to be sure, but then—after all, there were attractions, he said to himself, which survived the bread and butter age; and in this beatific state of mind was proceeding down the avenue, when all of a sudden he came to a dead halt, turned sharp round, and making a sudden rush, as his manner was, through the brushwood, vaulted over the boundary wall, alighting on the other side with a jar that staggered him for the moment—once more he had heard the voice.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. OLDHAM looked round him with bewilderment, when he had recovered the shock of his sudden leap. The wall was so much lower

on the other side at this particular point, that his limbs jarred and smarted with the unnecessary violence of the spring. He was on the common which bounded this side of the little demesne of The Blossoms, and where there were many inequalities of soil. There was one female figure moving quickly away among the gorse-bushes, but nobody else visible, so far as he could see. Of course Mr. Oldham made a rush after the woman, though it was impossible to imagine that she could be the possessor of that voice. He went after her in his impetuous way, stumbling among the gorse and over the hillocks, among which she glided with perfect composure, and great rapidity. Before he made up to her she had reached the further end of the common, just where it came to a climax in a pretty perspective of the village of Beddington. Of course Mr. Oldham's mind, distracted as it was by the perpetual succession of small undulations, and by the prickly barriers of gorse, had no leisure for the landscape or the picturesque church tower with its clothing of ivy, which confronted him peacefully at this crisis. He rushed up to the passenger before him, and had laid his hand upon her shoulder, before it occurred to him to determine what he should say.

"Ah—I beg your pardon—I—I imagined I heard a voice I knew," said poor Mr. Oldham, turning very red, and seeing, but indistinctly, in his confusion, a face half turned towards him under a black gauze veil. "Did you—did you hear anybody talking?" said the embarrassed man, in his despair. Just then it occurred to him what a ridiculous appearance he must make to the stranger whom he addressed. "I trust you will excuse me for such an absurd question," he stammered, "but I thought I heard a voice—a very peculiar voice—the voice of a man I am very anxious to find. I beg your pardon—you did not meet any one?" Mr. Oldham's confusion was such, that, had she been a sensible woman whom he addressed, she might have passed on with perfect freedom, and left him totally unenlightened; but she was not a sensible woman, and she could not resist the opportunity.

"Who do you suppose I could meet on Beddington Common, if it were not a madman like yourself?" she said, with a sneer. "Do you go all over the country asking everybody if they've heard a voice? I haven't heard no voice but your own, and I've heard it afore, and it ain't pleasant."

"Hallo!" said Mr. Oldham to himself. The woman went on, but she did not escape his roused suspicion;—"You've heard my voice before?" he said, keeping abreast of her, "and I've heard yours. Who are you? Ah, I remember—I knew you had something to do with it. What are you doing here?"

The latter part of this address was broken into short sentences, in consequence of the unusual haste to which, for the moment, the

speaker was stimulated. "What are you doing here?" he continued, when he had regained his breath a little. "Who were you talking to on the common? I always thought you knew who that man was. I will give you five pounds, ten pounds, any amount of money you like," said the stout Quixote, getting excited, "if you will tell me who he is."

"If I knew what the gentleman meant, there's few things a poor creature like me wouldn't tell for ten pound," said the woman, lifting her stealthy eyes. "The bit of paper as you stole out of poor Jasper's purse was worth more than that. If you know me, I know you, and the shabby trick as you played, which was stealing if ever there was stealing, and wronging of the poor," she added vindictively. She could not have invented an accusation to which Mr. Oldham was more feelingly alive.

"My good woman, I explained to you before," he said, with some haste, "that the bit of paper was only an address."

"As if I didn't know! I've found you out; you ain't kept that secret all to yourself," said, with a grim exultation, the sister of the murdered man.

Mr. Oldham again said "Hallo!" to himself. "You've come here about the child!" he went on, impulsively, looking at her. It was the strangest duel; for the vulgar spite of his antagonist made her about as imprudent as himself.

"You'll hear about that afore to-morrow," said the woman; and with that she suddenly crossed over to a roadside public-house, and darted in at the door, where Mr. Oldham followed her, in much trouble and disturbance of mind. He went into the little public room, and asked where she was. He looked all about, and made his way upstairs trying to find her; finally he called the landlord to pursue his inquiries, and finding them vain, settled himself to wait; feeling more baffled, circumvented, alarmed, and disrespectable than ever man did before. But he could not renew the irritating conversation. She had escaped him somehow, he could not tell by what means; and the unlucky witness of Jasper Tyrrel's death was left alone in the country inn, nobody being able to tell him anything about this woman in the veil, or about any man with a peculiar voice. The people stared at him and thought him mad, when he began to question them. But Mr. Oldham's straightforward British eloquence soon aroused the village. He knew nothing of the arts of detectiveism, nor did he understand how to hold his tongue; on the contrary, he told them roundly all about it, growing more and more excited as he went on with the story. He grew a hero to his audience—and indeed to himself for that matter—before he had done; and everybody in Beddington became aware that there was a murderer somewhere loose about the place, which made a wonderful sensation among the rural people. As for Mr. Oldham's own feelings, those were of a very

mingled description. He could not go away as he had intended, and leave the foe in possession of the field; he could not give up the chance of capturing the culprit whom he alone could identify; and then there was the helpless child, against which, somehow, these two were evidently plotting. The emergency, on the whole, was embarrassing. He had nobody to advise or help him in the matter, and the rural police at Beddington were without an idea on the subject; and he was anxious not to disturb Miss Mead, and eager to relieve the mind of the poor little widow in London, who was to come to him at Fulham next morning for news of her child. Never was a goodnatured man in such a perplexity. He threw off his coat in his despair, and sat down in his shirt-sleeves to think it over; which was cooling, certainly, but brought no enlightenment to his mind. Here he was, in a strange place, with the management of one of the most difficult operations of justice in his hands, and nobody to give him any assistance. On his coolness and self-possession it must now depend whether or not the criminal was to be secured, and the oppressed to be delivered. The responsibility was terrible. Mr. Oldham laid a hundred plans, as he sat thinking in the little sanded parlour of the "White Lion," interrupting himself now and then to get up and go to the door and ask somebody outside if they had seen anything of *that* woman. The "White Lion" was surrounded by scouts, anxious to carry information, who, of course, though Mr. Oldham did not think of that, effectually warned off anybody with a troubled conscience, and secured that "*that* woman" should not come that way again. The excitement, indeed, was so great, that the equivocal characters of the village grew uneasy, and began to have apprehensions of being taken up on suspicion. The "White Lion" became a grand amateur police-office, and all the *gamins* of Beddington swore themselves special constables. Nothing could be conceived less like the ordinary appearance of that innocent English village on a sunny and rather slumbrous summer afternoon, than the present appearance of Beddington. Such was the immediate result of that visit to Miss Mead, Blossoms, which Mr. Oldham had undertaken with so much bashful alacrity, and expectations so unlike the truth.

CHAPTER VII.

It was getting towards dusk, and Mr. Oldham had been all over the village, and walked for miles about the common, with a policeman in the distance, making a perfectly ineffectual, but certainly quite honest and transparent investigation. The only place he had avoided going to was The Blossoms itself, which, chivalrous even in his perplexity, he magnanimously declined to invade, much as his longing was to ask

Miss Mead's advice. Somehow he thought of Miss Mead's advice with wonderful confidence, as if that could not fail to throw light on the subject. The public-spirited Briton was toiling back again for the tenth time over the gorse bushes, wiping his forehead, and in a state of general moisture and relaxation, with his policeman a little way off, excessively tired, hungry, and excited, but quite incapable of paying any attention to dinner—even if the "White Lion," in its excited state, could have produced that meal—and ready to start off to the other end of the parish on any wild-goose chase that might be suggested to him; for hunting criminals was not Mr. Oldham's natural *rôle*, and by this time he had lost his head altogether, and had no invention left. And this was his condition, when, coming sharp round the corner of the wall which encircled The Blossoms, heaving a heavy sigh of perplexity and exhaustion, he suddenly encountered a little party of ladies taking an evening walk, at the head of whom he recognised Miss Mead. Mr. Oldham took off his hat with an alarmed and deprecating look. He felt that his presence there demanded an explanation.

"So you have not gone away," said Miss Mead, pausing suddenly, as if she felt much disposed to laugh. Mr. Oldham seized his opportunity. He explained his troubles with all the eagerness of a man who expects help. "When I found that rascal was here, of course I could not move," he said; "I always knew that woman was in the secret somehow. I must find the fellow now—Hallo Peters! be sure you keep a look out; don't forget the reward. I am determined not to lose him this time. I have some lads watching at the railway. It must be to look for the child, of course, that they have come here."

"And I suppose you've been to Jenny Brown and warned her?—No?—then you'd much better go directly," said Miss Mead. "Come with me, I will show you the nearest way."

"But oh, Auntie! don't leave us. Think, how are we to go up the avenue by ourselves when there is such a wretch about?" cried one of the girls. Mr. Oldham's soft heart was moved by the voice of distress.

"Perhaps we can walk up the avenue with them," said the susceptible man. "What a fool I was not to go to the cottage long ago. Peters! mind you don't let anybody go by without calling me," he cried to the policeman, with looks of bewilderment, which, notwithstanding their sympathy, set those foolish girls tittering. "Come along, come along," cried Miss Mead, who swept them all before her like a lively little avalanche. The nieces ran home and in-doors, while Mr. Oldham and this new Una of his, pursued the darkening path together. Jenny Brown's cottage was within the grounds which belonged to The Blossoms, and his conductor put up her hand and bade him "hush!" when he essayed to speak. They went on silently, scarcely visible except by the gleam

of her light dress among the trees; and in a great maze of confusion was the mind of Mr. Oldham, who did not feel very sure whether he was not walking on his head, and to whom the sensation of pursuing this unknown, never-seen enemy, in close company and fellowship with that "Miss Mead, Blossoms," whom he had so long anxiously preserved from annoyance and publicity, was altogether bewildering. The door of Jenny's cottage was open when they reached it, the fire was glimmering in the little kitchen, but it was silent and empty, and a little distance off a moving light was perceptible, and a shrill cry of "Charlie, Charlie," betrayed clearly enough the state of affairs. "You are too late," said Miss Mead, and she went off like a little arrow of light shot through the darkness to question and comfort the poor woman. As for Mr. Oldham, he was excited beyond words. He had almost forgotten Miss Mead, and the necessity of taking her home first, in the commotion of his mind; and when he recollected this duty, rushed after her and was very near taking her up in his arms in his haste, and carrying her off out of harm's way. "I beg your pardon, but I can't wait for any questions; they must be found to-night," said the troubled man, who, except that he wanted to rush wildly down into the road, and shout out to everybody that the wretches must be caught, had not an idea what to do. All the troubles of the past had been nothing to this:—the child he had come to seek was lost, the criminal whom he had essayed to find, had escaped. The benevolent man was blazing with passion and excitement. "Come, come, I can't wait even for you," he cried, and hurried Miss Mead down the dark path. She gave in to him with the most singular docility, and half ran at his side as he hastened on. "I can't be of any use, so I'll stay at home and wait for news," she said, in a succession of little gasps; "but take my nephew and Jarvis, and every man about the house;" and they parted at the door of The Blossoms with a silent pressure of hands, like the oldest of old friends. It would be hopeless to describe what Mr. Oldham did after that: he was in three places at the same time all the night through. The railway station was a beleaguered fortress, through which not a traveller passed except under the strictest scrutiny; and every horse and vehicle within five miles of Beddington was laid under embargo before bedtime, that is, before the ordinary bedtime of the village, for nobody dreamed of retiring to rest that night. Mr. Oldham telegraphed up to London for all kinds of people; he sent to his friend Coleman for a detective officer, and sent a separate message at the same time to Scotland Yard. He telegraphed to his housekeeper, to his solicitor, to a police magistrate whom he happened to know, for advice what he was to do, and to all the stations about with a description, as far as he could give it, of the people he was in search of; and hour by hour as the night went on he added an additional ten pounds to the reward he had offered to anybody who would find

either the man or the woman. But the day came, and the people who had been helping him or gaping at him all night, were obliged to betake themselves to their individual businesses, and Miss Mead sent an imperative message ordering his immediate appearance at The Blossoms, where the poor man found a bath and his breakfast awaiting him, and was rehabilitated for the day's work. But what was he to do? Once again it appeared that the criminal had escaped out of his eager but unskilful hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEXT day brought all kinds of replies from all sorts of places. From Mr. Coleman a letter of remonstrance:—"What on earth is it to you?"—from Scotland Yard a detective, who smiled cynically at Mr. Oldham, and took the matter out of his hands; and from various railway stations accounts of people who had been stopped, innocent women with babies, loudly vociferous, and thenceforward provided with a grievance for life. Among these injured persons Mr. Oldham's five-pound notes were dispensed very quickly, for the detective did not see the necessity of undertaking that part of the business. The housekeeper at Fulham wrote her master word, with her duty, that "the ladies 'ad called and 'ad gone away again and left a message as they'd come next day;" and the police magistrate's advice was to the effect that his public-spirited friend should do nothing at all, unless it was really the fact, as he began to hear it whispered at the club, that Oldham had killed the man at the "Angel" himself. It will be apparent to the most cursory observation, that little comfort was to be got out of these communications; and perhaps that was why Mr. Oldham remained in Beddington, which respectable little village and community had grown more slumbrous than ever after its brief excitement. The people there looked with a certain distrust and unbelief upon Mr. Oldham, except the people of the "Black Swan," where he had removed from the "White Lion," and where he was still believed in after a fashion. As for the rest of the population, a sense of having been taken in and made to commit itself, was strong in its mind. Its expectations had been raised unduly, the murderer-hunt had come to nothing, and the reward hung, unattainable as the Holy Grail, over its tantalized head; a little spite was not unnatural under the circumstances. And Beddington began to whisper that most likely Mr. Oldham was a fortune-hunter, and wanted to ingratiate himself with Miss Mead. Certainly he spent a great deal of his time at The Blossoms, one way or another, and went out with the ladies for the usual evening walk, which he had once interrupted. Not that he had it all his own way there, any more than he had when

Fanny Maidstone was the object of his adoration, for Miss Mead was the centre of her little society, and knew all about how to manage it far better than the girls did, who were new to the effects of their own charms, and apt to be carried away out of the necessary self-possession. Miss Mead, however, on the whole, was favourable to the devoted Squire of Dames who had fallen a victim to the very sound of her name. He had never breathed to her ear a syllable of his original expectation of finding her five-and-twenty. If she had been five-and-twenty, would she have been half as charming? Mr. Oldham remembered his own age with a sensation of comfort, when he saw her point to the girls with her pretty white hand and wave the young fellows away; and altogether this little pause in the tragedy which pursued him was a pleasant point in his career. He got to like Beddington, though only half the people believed in him. He felt able to wait for the discovery of the man with the voice and the female kidnapper in the black veil; he could even tolerate the superiority of the detective, who, however, had not as yet found out anything. The only thing that really disturbed the good man was the thought of the poor little widow, to whom he had written a full account of his expedition, and whose heart was breaking for her child. When he got up of a morning in the sudden access of virtuous feeling which is apt to come upon a man when he pulls the string of his shower-bath, uncomfortable pricks of conscience overtook his charitable soul. He had promised to find her child for her, poor little thing, and he had not done it; the little dark figure in her deep mourning sometimes would intrude even into the sunny landscape brightened by Miss Mead, and then he would resolve upon some enormous but vague exertions. But if nothing came of the detective who was so superior, what could poor Mr. Oldham do? He found out that Beddington was very good for his health, and there was enough trout in the Beddon to excuse him for lingering, had anybody inquired too particularly into his motives. So he stayed at the "Black Swan" to the great satisfaction of the landlady, and called at The Blossoms most days of the week, on one pretence or another, and in fact rather enjoyed himself, and forgot all about the voice.

This, however, was a state of things which could not last. The detective departed on investigations which he promised to confide to Mr. Oldham, and that heroic Briton himself, after an interval of peacefulness, was compelled to retrace his steps to Fulham and look after his own affairs; not to say that winter was approaching, and that Mr. Oldham had neglected all those engagements with the grouse and partridges which had been formed prior to his acquaintance with Miss Mead. It was in rather a melancholy frame of mind that he left Beddington and the "Black Swan," where, indeed, there was a judicious landlady who understood Mr. Oldham's tastes, and did not despair

of seeing him again. When he returned to his bachelor's house, it was astonishing how dismal everything looked; in comparison with the brightness of The Blossoms, Fulham was a desert; and Mr. Oldham looked over his engagements disconsolately, and did not see the good of going down to the country in the end of October to the society of men, in a direction quite the contrary of Beddington. At his club even, the lingering old fogies asked him about his murder with the heaviest attempt at joking, and wanted to know if it had not been brought home to him yet, and all about it; talk which sounded wonderfully dull after the lighter *badinage* of The Blossoms. A conviction of the inferiority of the male portion of the creation altogether, forced itself upon Mr. Oldham's understanding—a sound conclusion, which had visited him by glimpses at former periods of his history, but never (he thought) so clearly as now. Mrs. Stocks, his housekeeper, found her master shorter of temper at that particular crisis than she had ever known him before;—"which he was hasty at the best," said that experienced woman. Happily, poor little Mrs. Lambert had gone off somewhere in the country on a vain search after her lost child; so that one shadow, at least, was temporarily removed out of his troubled way.

Christmas came, and Mr. Oldham departed on a visit which he had suddenly engaged to make, not because the house was one which attracted him much, or the company entirely to his mind, but because it happened to be in Cheshire, and would afford a very good and sufficient excuse for a run to Beddington. He went off in good spirits, pleased with his prospects, and secretly assuring himself that before he came back it was possible ——. The house he was going to was a great country-house, where a large party had assembled—its owner was a hospitable, profuse man, who invited everybody who came in his way; so that the assembly was highly miscellaneous, and likely to be amusing enough. These inducements, however, did not weigh with Mr. Oldham. It was in Cheshire, it was within reach of Beddington—nothing more was necessary to make it attractive to the champion of Miss Mead.

Nothing particular occurred on the first day of the visit. Mr. Oldham was "chaffed" by all his acquaintances, on the subject of "that poor man you killed down at the 'Angel,' you know"—but bore everything with equanimity, thinking of The Blossoms. Next day some new visitors were expected to arrive, one of whom rather excited his curiosity. It was Sir Joseph Lambert, who, people said, was a man of very doubtful reputation, whom the too liberal host had picked up somewhere suddenly, after his usual fashion. He was poor little Ellen Lambert's father-in-law, Mr. Oldham guessed, and the idea roused him to a little interest. There was so large a party that it was difficult to

make out the new-comers in the partially lighted drawing-room when they all assembled before dinner. Mr. Oldham had been thinking of something else, and had forgotten all about Sir Joseph Lambert. He had just settled himself comfortably in his seat, and was waiting for his soup and talking to his next neighbour, when, suddenly lifting his head, he saw across the table, over one of the pretty bouquets which adorned it, a face, pallid and ghastly with sudden fear, staring at him with wild projecting eyes. Mr. Oldham instinctively started, and sat bolt upright, returning the look—who was it? Certainly a face he had seen before. As he gazed at the stranger in his surprised way, the eager projecting eyes seemed to follow the movements of his, as if fascinated. They never left him or let him go, but kept glaring over the flowers as if they had escaped altogether from the control of their owner. When Mr. Oldham, not to be uncivil, turned again to speak to the person who sat next him, the terrified eyes looked relieved, but did not cease to watch. Who could it be? Dinner was barely over before Mr. Oldham, pausing in the midst of a sentence, said "Hallo!" softly to himself. He had found it out;—it was the man with the cravat, who had travelled with Miss Mead and himself to Beddington. He jumped at the second step of this discovery when he concluded that this was Sir Joseph Lambert, and that possibly here might be a means of hearing of the poor little child. What was there else that hung like a cloud of gathering suspicion in Mr. Oldham's mind? He did not quite know, as he sat silent, neglecting his dinner and his neighbour, drinking his wine absently, and watching the stranger across the table. There was nothing interesting in this stranger; in appearance he had very little to recommend him, and though Sir Joseph Lambert had a reputation for wit, this man with the scared face did not speak, but devoted himself to *his* dinner, for which, after all, he did not seem to have much appetite. When somebody at a little distance addressed him, he answered only with a nod, and Mr. Oldham did not once see him speak to anybody, even his next neighbour. Gradually the sole witness of poor Jasper Tyrrel's death left off pretending to pay any attention to the business of the table, and sat leaning forward a little, watching with intent eyes the equally silent guest opposite. Presently this strange mutual watch came to be discovered by the people next to them. Curious glances passed from side to side of the table. The new-comer, growing nervous, made great work with his knife and fork, but only showed the more that his hand trembled, and that he could not eat. In this way matters went on till the ladies retired. In the commotion that ensued after that event, Mr. Oldham, who was getting very much excited, changed his place and drew nearer to the object of his suspicion. The face of the representative of Justice was gradually growing crimson, and his hand shook as he filled his glass. He knew

now what was the vague but more dreadful suspicion which lay beyond all his anxieties about the child. He remembered, with a sudden flash of insight, the sound of that voice which he had heard on the other side of the boundary-wall at The Blossoms, on the day that he and this man had travelled there together—and why didn't he speak? Mr. Oldham edged his chair nearer to that of Sir Joseph Lambert—his nervousness and indecision disappeared before the force of his excitement. There was now only one person sitting between them, though the other gentlemen about, perceiving by instinct that something was coming, were not talking to the extent usual on such occasions. Mr. Oldham, who had swallowed his wine at a gulp, leaned over, across the alarmed individual, who, with one empty chair beside, was between him and Sir Joseph. He leaned his arm upon the table, and bent over, looking into the new-comer's face.

"When you did me the honour to travel with me to Beddington, did you find what you wanted, Sir Joseph?" said Mr. Oldham. "I recognised you as soon as I saw you. You found what you sought, did you not?" The pursuer fixed his eyes upon the man he suspected with a scrutiny which was felt all over the table, felt so strongly that the very fact made a diversion in favour of the suspected. He, too, drank off his glass of claret hurriedly, and raised his anxious projecting eyes, and stared at the speaker. He gave a little nod in answer to the question, and then an appealing glance around him—that was all—nothing apparently could move him to speak.

"You don't answer me," said Mr. Oldham. "May I ask why you don't say anything? I should be glad to have a direct answer to my question. Why don't you speak?"

Looks cannot kill, fortunately for Mr. Oldham, and the man he was interrogating seemed to have no other means of expressing his rage. He moved his hand to his face in a sullen pantomime. "Sore throat," he said gruffly, under his breath.

"He won't speak to me," said Mr. Oldham, starting from his chair, "he hasn't opened his lips since first he saw me opposite. What do you suppose it means, gentlemen? Can't he speak? or doesn't he dare to open his lips before *me*? He can clear himself if he will," continued the impulsive speaker, growing hotter and hotter. "I challenge him to speak if he dares—but if he doesn't speak, he's my prisoner; let any man interfere at his peril. Speak out, sir—if it wasn't you that killed Jasper Tyrrel, and stole the child at Beddington, speak out, and say it's a lie!"

The accused rose up like his accuser. "It's a lie," he said, with white lips—then he stood dumb, facing him like a wild beast at bay. He did not utter another word. He took refuge in silence, growing ghastly as he closed his lips tight. Various outcries arose in the room

round the desecrated table, where now all the guests were standing in the general excitement. "Make him speak!" said Mr. Oldham, who was too much disturbed to be calmed down. "Do you all hear that he daren't speak? Coleman, hold your tongue, you're an ass! I know what I am talking of. I tell you he daren't speak! Make him speak and I'll—I'll beg his pardon if I have wronged him. Speak, or you're my prisoner! Do you hear me? I've thought of little else for six months. I'm not to be deceived now. Speak, or you shall be made to speak!" cried the violent man. All the confusion of remonstrance, of explanation, and peace-making which naturally followed, made no difference to Mr. Oldham. "My dear fellow, you don't know who you're speaking to. It's all a mistake," said the troubled host. "For Heaven's sake, Oldham, mind what you're about! You'll be brought up for libel, and I don't see what one can say for you," remonstrated his friend Coleman, vainly trying to draw him away. But the baronet at that moment made a stealthy move towards the door, and the avenger, struggling out of the hands of his friends, rushed in before him, and set his back against it, blocking up the way. "Not a step till you speak out!" he cried loudly, in his excitement and passion. It was at this moment that the suspected man, losing his wits, apparently, in the crisis, and bewildered by the adjuration to speak out and make an end of it, which everybody was addressing to him, suddenly rushed to the window, and throwing it open, leaped out into the darkness. It is impossible to describe the commotion that followed. To secure Mr. Oldham and forcibly prevent his pursuit, was occupation enough for half of the startled company—and two or three of the others plunged out after Sir Joseph, without any reason for it, in a vague bewilderment and curiosity. They had thought Oldham mad up to this moment, and had been disposed to side with the unfortunate stranger whom he had attacked about "that murder of his." But the flight of the accused was too serious to bear smiling at, especially when the men who had followed him reappeared one after another some time after, out of the snowy Christmas night, unable to bring any news of the runaway. "We shall have it all explained in the morning," said the disconcerted host, with a confidence which he did not feel. But Mr. Oldham, in his evening coat, left the room directly to telegraph to his detective, and to betake himself to another hot and vehement search. After he had roused up the nearest hamlet, and repeated the scene once enacted at the "White Lion," and offered fabulous rewards, Mr. Oldham drove off at midnight to Beddington, to tell his adventure and ask advice. But perhaps his excitement had calmed down before he reached The Blossoms; perhaps personal business such as there absorbed him is not consistent with a very devoted public spirit. For the truth is that he left the rest of the work in other hands, and that so far as he himself personally was con-

cerned, notwithstanding the vehemence of all the preliminary steps, almost an entire lull and cessation followed in the hot pursuit of Sir Joseph Lambert's voice.

At the same time everybody must remember the curious trial in which the counsel for the prosecution had to acknowledge himself utterly balked by the persistent refusal of the prisoner to speak. Identification was only possible by means of the voice of the supposed culprit, and the supposed culprit shut himself up in the most obstinate silence, and for weeks together communicated with the people around him only in carefully chosen monosyllables. The cross-examination of Mr. Oldham on that occasion was considered one of the greatest efforts of the distinguished Queen's Counsel who was retained for the defence. The disclosures of the witness kept the court in shouts of laughter, until the tide turned, and public sympathy began to run in favour of the hero of this tale. When it was elicited that Mr. Oldham had found his wife by means of this otherwise troublesome and harassing adventure, and was now a blissful bridegroom, the assembled multitude burst into vociferous applause for one half-minute, unchecked even by the Bench. A little biography of him appeared in all the papers next day; to be sure he could not identify the criminal, but he had managed to restore the lost child to its mother, and had won for himself the prettiest of old wives; besides being actually the means of bringing to justice the slayer of poor Jasper Tyrrel, who, however, it was proved, had never intended to kill the weakly victim, but was, to do him justice, as much horrified at the result of his blow, as the pursuer himself. Circumstantial evidence brought it all clear under the manipulation of the detective—and Mr. Oldham went home to The Blossoms with an easier conscience than if, after all, he had helped to hang the unhappy little man in the cravat.

"And, my dear," said the compassionate Briton, when he took his wife up to the pretty house, radiant and newly decorated, at Fulham, after Easter—"it is difficult for me to feel sorry for poor Jasper Tyrrel, poor fellow. If he had not been in a weak state of health I dare say he would not have died; so it was the visitation of God, you perceive—for if he had not died, the chances are I should never have found that scrap of paper which directed me to Miss Mead, Blossoms, Beddington—and if I had not found that address——."

"The conclusion of it all, is, of course, that Oldham killed the man himself," said his friend Coleman; "and instead of being hung, as he ought to have been, here he stands, a stone heavier, and the most beaming of bridegrooms; and I'll go down to next Commemoration, and go back to the 'Angel,' and try whether a lucky little stroke in the way of murder, or burglary, or any crime that is in fashion, will do as much for me."