CHAPTER IX.

DIRECTLY after breakfast was over the next morning the Rector came in.

"I would not come in yesterday, Mark," he said. "I knew that you would be best alone; and, indeed, I was myself so terribly upset by the news that I did not feel equal to it. I need not say how deeply I and my wife sympathize with you. Never did a kinder heart beat than your father's; never have I seen people so universally grieved as they are in the village. I doubt whether a man went to work yesterday, and as for the women, had it been a father they had lost they could not be more affected."

"Yes, he will be greatly missed," Mark said unsteadily; "and, between ourselves—but this must go no further—I have a suspicion, amounting almost to a certainty, that the hand that dealt this blow is the same that caused the vacancy that brought you here."

"Do you mean Arthur Bastow?" Mr. Greg said in amazement. "Why, I thought that he was transported for fifteen years."

Then Mark told the Rector the inner history of the past six months, and of the report they had had from the officer at Bow Street of the personal appearance of the wounded man.

"Other things are in favor of it," he went on. "My father's watch and purse were untouched, and a stranger on a dark night would be hardly likely to have discovered the ladder, or to have had a file in his pocket with which to cut through a link, though this might have been part of the apparatus of any burglar. Then, again, an ordinary man would hardly have known which was my father's bedroom, except, indeed, that he saw the light there after those in the ladies' rooms were extinguished; but, at any rate, he could not have told which was my father's and

which was mine. But all this is, as I said, Mr. Greg, quite between ourselves. I had a long talk yesterday with Sir Charles Harris, and, as he said, there is no legal proof whatever, strong as the suspicion is; so I am going to say nothing on the subject at the inquest. The scoundrel's poor father is dying, happily in ignorance of all this. Dr. Holloway was up with him all night, and told me this morning before he drove off that it is very unlikely that he will get through the day."

"It is all very terrible, Mark; but I cannot deny that everything points to the man. Surely no one else could have cut short so useful a life, for certainly no ordinary degree of hatred would drive a man, however brutal his nature, to commit such a crime, and to run the risk of hanging for it. Let us take a brisk walk in the garden for an hour—that will be the best thing for you. I will stop with you until the inquest is over, and then you had better come over and have lunch with us."

"Thank you; I cannot do so," Mark said, "though I should like to. In the first place, Millicent will come downstairs this afternoon, and I should like to be in to meet her. Had it not been for that I might have come, as I can walk across the fields to the Rectory without passing through the village. There is another reason. I sent up yesterday by the coach a letter to be delivered at once by hand, and I expect a detective down here by one o'clock. I don't know that he will do any good; but at the same time it will give me something to do, and at present there is nothing I dread so much as sitting alone. Fortunately, yesterday evening Millicent went to bed at five o'clock, and Mrs. Cunningham sat with me all the evening, and her talk did me a great deal of good."

The inquest occupied a very short time, the only point on which many questions were asked being as to the firing through the window. Mark stated that it was already so dark that although he was within fifty yards of the man when he mounted and rode off, he could not give any very distinct description of his figure. It struck him as being that of a man of medium height.

"You have made out that the bullet was intended for your father?"

"I cannot say that, sir, it went between his head and that of Mr. Bastow, but it might have been meant for either."

"Was your father impressed with the idea that it was an attempt to murder him?"

"He naturally thought so. Mr. Bastow can assuredly have no enemies, while my father, as a magistrate, may have made some. He certainly thought it was an attempt to murder him, and was so impressed by the fact that when we went to the library later on he went into certain family matters with me that he had never communicated before, and which, had it not been for this, he would not have entered into for some years to come."

"He had his opinion, then, as to who was his assailant?"

"He had, sir, but as it was but an opinion, although there were several facts that seemed to justify the conviction, there was no proof whatever, and therefore I do not think myself justified in saying what that opinion was."

"Do you entertain the same opinion yourself?"

"I do," Mark said emphatically; "but until I can obtain some evidence in support of what is really but a matter of opinion, and because, were I to give the name, it would lessen my chance of obtaining such evidence, I decline to mention the name."

"You have no doubt that the author of the second attempt is the same as that of the first?"

"Personally, I have no doubt whatever; it stands to reason that it is barely possible that two men could have, unknown to each other, made up their minds to murder my father on the same evening."

The constable's evidence added nothing to that given by Mark. He had been down to the lane where the man pursued had mounted. The reins of the horse had apparently been thrown over a gatepost, and he thought it had been standing there for some little time, for there were marks where it had scraped the ground repeatedly. He had followed the marks of its hoofs for some distance; it had gone at a gallop for about half a mile, and then the pace had slackened into a trot. It continued until the lane fell

into the main road, but beyond this he had been unable to distinguish it from the marks of the traffic in general.

"You found no footprints whatever near the foot of the ladder, or anywhere else round the house?"

"None whatever, sir."

"There were no signs of any other window or door save that of Mr. Thorndyke's room being attempted?"

"None at all, sir."

There was but a short consultation between the jurors, who at once returned a verdict of "Willful murder by some person or persons unknown."

Dr. Holloway had, after giving evidence, returned at once to Mr. Bastow's room. The only point of importance in his evidence was the statement that the wound must have been fatal at once, the heart itself having been penetrated. It had been inflicted by a dagger or a narrow-bladed knife.

"Do you mean that it was an unusually small dagger, Dr. Holloway?"

"I should say it was a very fine dagger; not the sort of weapon that you would expect to find a highwayman carry, if he carried one at all, but rather a weapon of Spanish or Italian manufacture."

"Not the sort of wound that a rapier would make?"

"Yes, the wound itself might have been very well made by a light rapier, but there was a slight bruise on the flesh on each side of the wound, such a mark as might be made by the handle or guard of a dagger, and sufficiently plain to leave no doubt in my mind that it was so made."

"Had the wound a downward course, or was it a straight thrust?"

"A straight thrust," the doctor replied. "My idea is that the two men were grappling together, and that as Mr. Thorndyke was a very powerful man, his assailant, who probably was approaching the bed with the dagger in his hand, plunged it into him; had he struck at him I should certainly have expected the course of the wound to be downward, as I fancy a man very seldom thrusts straight with a dagger, as he would do with a rapier."

When the inquest was over, Mark, going out into the hall, found the doctor waiting there for him.

"Mr. Bastow breathed his last some ten minutes ago. I saw when I went up to him just before I gave my evidence that it was likely that he would die before I returned to the room."

"I am very sorry," Mark said, "although I expected nothing else from what you told me. He was a very kind-hearted man; no one could have had a kinder or more patient tutor than he was to me, while my father regarded him as a very dear and valued friend. I am expecting the undertaker here in a few minutes, and they can both be buried at the same time."

It was late in the afternoon before Millicent came down with Mrs. Cunningham. The news of Mr. Bastow's death had set her tears flowing afresh; she had been very fond of him, and that he and the Squire should have been taken at once seemed almost beyond belief. She had, however, nerved herself to some degree of composure before she went down to meet Mark; but although she returned the pressure of his hand, she was unable for some time to speak. Mrs. Cunningham thought it best to speak first of the minor grief.

"So Mr. Bastow has gone, Mark?"

"Yes, Dr. Holloway thought very badly of him yesterday, and said that he had but very faint hope of his rallying. I cannot help thinking that it was best so. Of course, he was not a very old man, but he has for some years been a very feeble one, and now that Millicent and I have both given up our studies with him, I think that he would have felt that his work was done, and would have gone downhill very fast."

"I think so, too," Mrs. Cunningham agreed. "I am sure that even had the Squire's death come quietly, in the course of nature, it would have been a terrible blow to him. He was fond of you and Millicent, but his affection for your father was a passion; his face always lit up when he spoke to him. I used to think sometimes that it was like an old dog with his master. It was quite touching to see them together. I think, Mark, with you, that it is best that it should be as it is."

Gradually the conversation turned to other matters. Millicent was, however, unable to take any part in it, and

half an hour later she held out her hand silently to Mark and left the room hurriedly. The next day she was better, and was able to walk for a time with Mark in the garden and talk more calmly about their mutual loss, for to her, no less than to Mark, the Squire had been a father.

"'Tis strange to think that you are the Squire now, Mark," she said as they sat together in the dining room on the evening before the funeral.

"You will think it stranger still, Millicent," he said, "when I tell you that I am not the Squire, and never shall be."

She looked up in his face with wonder.

"What do you mean, Mark?"

"Well, dear, you will know to-morrow, as Mr. Prendergast, one of the family solicitors, is coming down; but I think it is as well to tell you beforehand. It has been a curious position all along. I never knew it myself till my father told me when we went into the library after the shot was fired. The news did not affect me one way or the other, although it surprised me a great deal. Like yourself, I have always supposed that you were my father's ward, the daughter of an old comrade of his brother's. Well, it is a curious story, Millicent. But there is no occasion for you to look frightened. The fact is you are my uncle's daughter and my cousin."

"Oh, that is not very dreadful!" she exclaimed in a tone of relief.

"Not dreadful at all," Mark said. "But you see it involves the fact that you are mistress of this estate, and not I."

Millicent stood up suddenly with a little cry.

"No, no, Mark, it cannot be! It would be dreadful, and I won't have it. Nothing could make me have it. What, to take the estate away from you when you have all along supposed it to be yours! How could I?"

"But you see it never has been mine, my dear. Father might have lived another five-and-twenty years, and God knows I have never looked forward to succeeding him. Sit down and let me tell you the story. It was not my father's fault that he reigned here so long as master; it was the result of a whim of your father's. And although

my father fought against it, he could not resist the dying prayer of my uncle."

He then related the whole circumstances under which the girl had been brought up as Millicent Conyers, instead of Millicent Conyers Thorndyke, and how the estate had been left by Colonel Thorndyke's will to his brother until such time as Millicent should come of age, or marry, and how he had ordered that when that event took place the rest of his property in money and jewels was to be divided equally between Mark and herself.

"It must not be, Mark," she said firmly. "You must take the estate, and we can divide the rest between us. What is the rest?"

"To begin with," Mark said cheerfully, "there are £25,000, the accumulations of the rents of the estate after the death of my grandfather up to the time when the Colonel returned from India; and there are, besides, a few thousands, though I don't exactly know how many, that my father paid over to the solicitors as the surplus of the rents of the estates after paying all expenses of keeping up this house. He very properly considered that although he had accepted the situation at your father's earnest wish, he ought not to make money by doing so. If we put it down at £30,000 altogether, you see there is £15,000 for each of us. A very nice sum for a young man to start life with, especially as I shall have my father's estate near Hastings, which brings in £500 a year; and as the rents of this have been accumulating for the last ten years, my share will be raised from £15,000 to £20,000. Besides this, there is the main bulk of the Colonel's fortune made in India. That seems to be worth about £100,000, but I must own that the chance of getting it seems very small."

"How is that, Mark?"

Mark told her the whole story.

"I mean to make it my business to follow the matter up," he said. "I think that the chance of ever finding it is very small. Still, it will give me an object to begin life with."

"Oh, I hope that you will never find it!" she exclaimed. "From what you say it will be a terrible danger if you do get it."

Mark smiled.

"I hardly think so, Millicent. I cannot believe that people would be following up this thing for over fifteen years, for it was many years before the Colonel came home that he got possession of these diamonds. Even Hindoos would, I think, have got sick of such a hopeless affair long before this; but as they may ever since your father's death have been watching us, although it hardly seems possible, I shall follow out the Colonel's instructions, and get rid of those particular diamonds at once. I shall only keep them about me long enough to take them to Amsterdam and sell them there. The Colonel said they were the finest diamonds that he ever saw, and that he really had no idea of what they were worth. However, that is for the future."

"Mrs. Cunningham has known this all along, Mark?"

"Not about the money affairs, but of course she knew that you were my cousin. She brought you from India, you see, and has known all along that the Colonel was your father. She knows it, and the family solicitors know it, but I believe no one else, except, perhaps, Ramoo. I am not sure whether he was in uncle's service when you were sent over in Mrs. Cunningham's charge. He may know it or he may not, but certainly no one else does, except, as I say, the solicitors and myself. Possibly some other of the Colonel's old comrades knew that there was a child born; but if they were in England and happened to hear that my father had succeeded to the estate, they would, of course, suppose that the child had died."

"Then," Millicent said, in a tone of relief, "there can be no reason why anyone else should know anything about it. I will see Mr. Prendergast when he comes down to-morrow, and beg him to say nothing about it; £15,000 is quite enough for any girl; and besides, you say that my father's greatest wish was that I was not to be married for money, and after all the pains that have been taken, his wish will not be carried out if I am to be made owner of the estate."

"You won't be able to persuade Mr. Prendergast to do that," Mark said, smiling. "It is his duty simply to carry out the provisions of your father's will, and to place you

in possession of the estate; and if he would keep silence, which he certainly won't, you don't suppose that I would."

"Then I shall hate you, Mark."

"I don't think you will, Millicent, and I would rather that you did that than that you should despise me. At the present moment you may think that this estate would be only a burden to you, but some day when you marry you might see the matter in a different light."

The girl looked at him reproachfully.

"I should never think so!" she burst out. "What would you have me do? Live here in this great house, with only Mrs. Cunningham, while you are going about the world seeking for this treasure? Never!"

"No, I don't think that it would be nice for you to do that, Millicent," Mark said. "Mrs. Cunningham and I have been talking it over. We thought that the best plan would be for her to take a house in London, and go there with you; you would have the advantages of good masters. Then you were saying only a short time since that you would like to learn the harp and take lessons in painting. There would be time enough to think about what you would do with respect to this house afterward."

"It is all horrible," Millicent said, bursting into tears, "and I shall always feel that I have robbed you."

"But I don't feel so in the least," Mark urged. "I was not in the smallest degree put out when my father told me about it. I have always had a fancy for wandering about the world, as my uncle did, and doing something to distinguish myself, instead of settling down for life to be a country magistrate and a squire. Of course it came as a surprise, but I can assure you that it was not an altogether unpleasant one. What can a man want more than a nice little estate of £500 a year and £20,000 in money?"

"It is all very well to say that, but as you said to me just now, you may see it in a different light some day." Then she sat thinking for some time. "At any rate," she went on at last, "I don't see why anyone should know about it now. If the house is to be shut up and you are going away, why need anyone know anything about it? My father's wish was that I should not have people making love to me just because I was an heiress; after all that has been done, it would be wicked to go against his wishes. I suppose the interest of this £15,000 would be enough for Mrs. Cunningham and I to live comfortably on in London?"

"Yes," Mark said; "it will, at 5 per cent., bring in £750 a year."

"Then I shall remain Millicent Conyers to the world. There is nothing to prevent that, is there?" she said almost defiantly.

"No," he replied thoughtfully. "The rents of this estate might accumulate. I suppose the solicitors would see after that; and as I shall be away it will, of course, make no difference to me. Were I to stay in the neighborhood I could not consent to live as my father did, in a false position; but even then I might give out that the property had only been left to my father during his lifetime, and that it had now gone elsewhere, without saying whom it had gone to. However, as I shall be away, there will be no occasion even for that. When the will is read there will be no one present but ourselves, and I don't see why its contents should not be kept a secret for a time; at any rate, we can ask Mr. Prendergast's opinion upon that subject."

At this moment Mrs. Cunningham coming into the room, Millicent ran to her and threw her arms round her neck.

"He has made me most miserable," she said. "I thought I could not have been more miserable than I was before he told me all about it."

"I knew that he was going to do so, and I was quite sure that you would not be pleased at the news. I have all along thought that it was a mistake on the part of your father; but as it was his decision, and not mine, I only had to carry out his wishes."

"It is cruel," Millicent sobbed. "I don't mean it is cruel of my father; of course he could not have known, and he thought he was doing the best thing for my happiness, but it has all turned out wrong."

"For the present you may think so, dear; but you must remember that up to the present time it has turned out well. I know that your uncle did not like it at first, but I

think that he passed ten happy years here. It gave him a great power for doing good, and he worthily availed himself of it. We have all spent a happy time; he was universally liked and respected. I think all of us have benefited by it. It would not have been half as pleasant if it had been known that you, my child, were the real owner of the estate, and he was acting merely as your guardian. Let us hope that everything will turn out as well in future. Colonel Thorndyke told me that he had left a considerable sum in addition to the estates, and that this was to be divided between you and Mark; so you see your cousin will not go out into the world a beggar."

"It is most of it lost," Millicent said with an hysterical laugh. "It is all hidden away, and no one can find it; everything has gone wrong together."

"Well, I think, dear, that you had better go up to bed. I will go with you. At the present time this, of course, has come upon you as an additional shock. I would gladly have shielded you from it for a time if I could have done so, but you must have learned it to-morrow, and I quite agree with Mark that is was better that he should tell you this evening. I sent down to the town to-day to the doctor's and asked him to send me up a soothing draught, thinking that you might be upset by the news. I hope by the morning you will be able to look at matters more calmly."

Some time later Mrs. Cunningham came down again.

"She has cried herself to sleep," she said. "She is much grieved about this money being lost."

"It is annoying; still I cannot help thinking that the Colonel must have taken some such precaution to prevent the treasure from being lost."

"One would certainly think so," Mrs. Cunningham agreed; "the Colonel seemed to me a methodical man. I know that he had the reputation of being one of the most particular men in the service as to all petty details. His instructions to me before I left him were all very minute, and he gave me a sealed packet which he told me contained instructions and a copy of the register of his marriage and of Millicent's birth, and he said that in case of his death I was to take it to your father. He said that there was a

letter inclosed in it to him, and also a copy of his will. The letter was directed to your father, and not to me. I handed it over to him when he asked me to come here. He told me afterwards that the letter contained the request that his brother lived to make personally to him—that the child should be brought up as his ward; and that he had handed the certificates to a lawyer, who had, however, received copies of them from the Colonel himself before he went down to see your father. So, as he took these precautions to insure his wishes being carried out in the event of his sudden death, I should think that he must have done something of the sort with regard to this treasure."

"I should think that extremely likely, Mrs. Cunningham. I certainly had not thought of that before, and I hope that for Millicent's sake and my own it may turn out to be so. I can get on extremely well without it, but at the same time I don't pretend that £50,000 are to be despised."

The next morning Mr. Prendergast, who had arrived at Reigate late the evening before, and had put up at an inn, came up to the house an hour before the time named for the funeral. He learned from Mark that he had already acquainted Millicent with her change of circumstances. A few minutes after he arrived, a servant told him that Miss Conyers would be glad if he would see her alone for a few minutes in the drawing room. Mark had already prepared him for her request.

"Mark has told you that he told me about this hateful thing last night, I suppose, Mr. Prendergast?"

"He has," the old lawyer said kindly; "and he tells me also that you are not at all pleased at the news."

"Pleased! I should think not, Mr. Prendergast," she said indignantly. "I am not going to rob my cousin of what he has always been taught to think as his inheritance. It is abominable, I call it, and most unnatural."

"But, my dear young lady, it is yours, and not his. I do not wish to discuss whether the arrangement was altogether a wise one, but I think that so far it has turned out well for all parties. Your estate has profited greatly by the management of your uncle, the tenants and all connected with it have benefited greatly, he himself has had

active employment afforded him, of which he was fond. Your cousin has, I believe, enjoyed the advantages of the position, and has become acquainted with the best people in this part of the country, and will now obtain the benefit of something like £15,000—a comfortable little sum, especially as he inherits, I believe, his father's property in Sussex. You yourself will have obtained what I cannot but consider the advantage of having been brought up without knowing that you were an heiress, and therefore without being spoiled, which is, in my opinion, the case with many young ladies in such a condition; therefore I cannot but think that, if unwise in its conception, the matter has so far worked out well. I am bound to say that Mr. Mark Thorndyke has been speaking to me very handsomely on the subject, and that he appears in no way disappointed at finding that you are the heiress of the estate, and is really concerned only at your unwillingness to accept the situation."

"I wanted to know, Mr. Prendergast," she said, but in a tone that showed she was convinced by his manner that her request would be refused, "if you could arrange so that things would not be disturbed, and he should come into possession as his father's heir in the natural way."

"But you see he is not his father's heir, Miss Thorndyke. His father only had the use, as we call it, of the property until you came of age, or marriage; it was not necessary for it to come to you on your coming of age, but only, as your father explained to me, in the event of your marriage; that is to say, it was not to become public that you were entitled to the estate until your marriage. If you married before you were twenty-one the property was then to come to you. If you did not your were to be informed of the circumstances or not, as Mr. Thorndyke might decide was best, but you were not to come into the property until you married. Your cousin was also to be informed when you came to the age of twenty-one, and as at that time he was to take his half-share of the remainder of the property, he would then be able to arrange his life as he liked. If your uncle died, as unfortunately he has done, before you reached the age of twenty-one, you would then be placed in your proper position; but your

father desired us to say to you that it was his wish, that if it could be arranged, your having succeeded to the ownership should not be publicly known until you divulged it to your husband after marriage. The other portions of the will must be carried out. This being only a request, you are at liberty to follow it or not as you may choose."

"Certainly I should choose," the girl said. "After all this trouble to prevent my being run after as an heiress, it would be wicked to upset it all and to fly in the face of his wishes by setting up as mistress of this estate. Still you understand, Mr. Prendergast, that I don't mean to take it."

The lawyer smiled indulgently.

"There is one way in which it might be managed," he said. "Perhaps you can guess what it is?"

A flush of color rose over the girl's face.

"Don't say it, I beg of you, Mr. Prendergast. Mrs. Cunningham hinted at it this morning, and I told her that my own wish entirely agreed with that of my father, and that I was determined not to be married for money; and I am quite sure that Mark would be as unwilling as I am that the estate should change hands in that way. No, Mr. Prendergast, you must find some other way of doing it than that. Surely an estate cannot be forced upon anyone who is determined not to take it."

"Well, we must think it over," Mr. Prendergast said quietly. "And now I think that it is time for me to join the others."