CHAPTER XXVI

THE RESCUE

"O, who lives on the Island,
Betwix' the sea an' the sky?
—I think it must be a lady, a lady,
I think it must be a genuwine lady,
She carries her head so high."—*Old Ballad.*

IN the moonlit garden of the Casino at Monte Carlo Miles Chandon smoked a cigar pensively, leaning against the low wall that overlooks the pigeon-shooters' enclosure, the railway station, and the foreshore. He was alone, as always. That a man who, since the great folly of his life, had obstinately cultivated solitude should make holiday in Monte Carlo, of all places, is paradoxical enough; but in truth the crowd around the tables, the diners at the hotel, the pigeon-shooters, the whole cosmopolitan gathering of idle rich and predatory poor, were a spectacle to him and no more. If once or twice a day he staked a few napoleons on black or red in the inner room of the Casino, it was as a man, finding himself at Homburg or Marienbad, might take a drink of the waters from curiosity and to fill up the time. He made no friends in the throng. He found no pleasure in it. But when he grew weary at home in his laboratory, or when his doctor advised that confinement and too much poring over chemicals were telling on his health, he packed up and made for Monte Carlo, or some other expensive place popularly supposed to be a "pleasure-resort." As a matter of fact, he did not understand pleasure, or what it means.

Finding him in this pensive attitude in the moonlit garden by the sea, you might guess that he was senti-

mentalising over his past. He was doing nothing of the sort. He was watching a small greyish-white object the moon revealed on the roof of the railway station below, just within the parapet. He knew it to be a pigeon that had escaped, wounded, from the sportsmen in the enclosure. Late that afternoon he had seen the poor creature fluttering. He wondered that the officials (at Monte Carlo they clean up everything) had not seen it before and removed it. He watched it, curious to know if it were still alive. He had a fancy at the back of his head—that if the small body fluttered again he would go back to his rooms, fetch a revolver, and give the *coup de grâce*. And he smiled as he played with the fancy, foreseeing the rush of agitated officials that a revolver-shot in the gardens would instantly bring upon him. It would be great fun, explaining; but the offence, no doubt, would be punishable. By what? Banishment, probably.

He turned for a moment at the sound of a footstep, and was aware of his man Louis.

"A telegram, sir."

"Eh? Now who in the world—— Matters hasn't burnt down Meriton, I hope?"

He opened the telegram and walked with it to the nearest of the electric lamps; read it, and stood pondering.

"Louis, when does the new night-express leave for Paris?"

"In twenty-five minutes, sir."

"Then I've a mind to catch it. Put up a travelling-suit in my bag. I can get out of these clothes in the train. You had better pack the rest, pay the bill, and follow to-morrow."

"If you wish it, sir. But if I may suggest——"

"Yes?"

"In twenty minutes I can do all that easily, and book the sleeping-berths too. I suggest, sir, you will find it more comfortable, having me on the train"

"Admirable man—hurry up, then!"

The admirable man saluted respectfully and retired "hurt," as they say in the cricket reports. He never hurried; it was part of the secret by which he was always punctual. At the station he even found time to suggest that his master might wish to send a telegram and to dispatch it.

This was on Sunday. They reached London late on Monday evening, and there—Louis having telegraphed from Paris—Sir Miles found his favourite room ready for him at Claridge's. Next morning, as his hansom drew up a few minutes after eleven o'clock by the entrance to Paddington Station, he observed that the porter who stepped forward from the rank to attend on him, did so with a preoccupied air. The man was grinning, and kept glancing along the pavement to his right.

"Luggage on the cab just behind," said Sir Miles, alighting. "Never mind me; my man will take the tickets and get me a seat. But what's the excitement here?"

"Lady along there, sir—offering to fight her cabby. Says he can't drive for nuts——"

"Hullo!"

Sir Miles looked, recognised Miss Sally, and walked briskly towards her. She caught sight of him and nodded.

"Thought you would come. Excuse me a moment."

She lifted her voice and addressed the cabby again—

"Oh, you can talk. They taught you that at the Board School, no doubt. But drive you cannot; and talk you would not, if you knew the respect due to a mouth—your own or your horse's."

With this parting shot she turned to Sir Miles again, and held out her hand.

"Tell your man he needn't trouble about a seat for you. I've engaged a compartment where we can talk."

"Well?" he asked, ten minutes later, lowering his newspaper as the train drew out of the station.

"Well, in the first place, it's very good of you to come."

"Oh, as for that . . . You know that if I can ever do you any service——"

"But you can't. It was for your own sake I telegraphed."

"Mine? Is Meriton really burnt to the ground, then? But even that news wouldn't gravely afflict me."

"It isn't—and it would. At any rate, it might now, I hope," said Miss Sally enigmatically.

He waited for her to continue.

"Your wife's dead!" she said.

She heard him draw a quick breath.

"Indeed?" he asked indifferently.

"But your son isn't—at least, I hope not."

He looked up and met her eyes.

"But I had word," he said slowly, "word from her, and in her own handwriting. A boy was born, and died six or seven weeks later—as I remember, the letter said within a week after his christening."

Miss Sally nodded.

"That settles it," she said; "being untrue, as I happen to know. The child was alive and hearty a year after the christening, when they left Cawsand and moved to the East Coast. The fact is, my friend, you had run up—if not in your wife, then in the coastguardsman Ned Commins—against a pride as stubborn as your own. They wrote you a lie—that's certain; and I'm as hard as most upon liars; but, considering all, I don't blame 'em. They weren't mercenary, anyway. They only wanted to have no more truck with you."

"Have you seen the boy?"

Again Miss Sally nodded.

"Yes, and there's no doubting the parentage. I never saw that cross-hatched under-lip in any but a Chandon, though you *do* hide it with a beard: let alone that he carries the four lozenges tattooed on his shoulder.

Ned Commins did that. There was a moment, belike, when they weakened—either he or the woman. But you had best hear the story, and then you can judge the evidence for yourself."

She told it. He listened with set face, interposing here and there to ask a question, or to weigh one detail of her narrative against another.

"If the children should be lost—which God forbid!" she wound up, "—and if I never did another good day's work in my life, I'll remember that they started me to clear that infernal Orphanage. It's by the interposition of Heaven that you didn't find me on Paddington platform with three-and-twenty children under my wing. 'Interposition of Heaven,' did I say? You may call it, if you will, the constant and consistent foolishness of my brother Elphinstone. In every tight corner of my life I've learnt to trust in Elphinstone for a fool, and he has never betrayed me yet. There I was in the hotel with these twenty-three derelicts, all underfed, and all more or less mentally defective through Glasson's ill-treatment. Two or three were actually crying, in a feeble way, to be 'taken home,' as they called it. They were afraid—afraid of their kind, afraid of strange faces, afraid of everything but to be starved and whipped. I was forced to send out and buy new clothes for some, there and then; and their backs, when I stripped 'em, were criss-crossed with weals—not quite fresh, you understand, for Glasson had been kept busy of late, and the woman Huggins hadn't his arm. Well, there I was, stranded, with these creatures on my hands, all of 'em, as you may say, looking up at me in a dumb way, and wanting to know why I couldn't have let 'em alone—and if ever I smash up another Orphanage you may call me a Turk, and put me in a harem—when all of a sudden it occurred to me to look up the names of the benevolent parties backing the institution. The woman had given me a copy of the prospectus, intending to impress me. I promised myself I'd rattle these philanthropists as they'd never been rattled before in their lives. And

then—why had I ever doubted him?—half-way down the list I lit on Elphinstone's name. . . . His place is at Henley-in-Arden, you see, and not far from Bursfield. . . . So I rattled the others (I spent three-quarters of an hour in the telegraph office, and before eleven last night I had thirty-two answers. They are all in my bag, and you shall look 'em over by and by, if you want to be tickled), but I sent Elphinstone what the girl Tilda would call a cough-drop. It ran to five sheets or thereabouts, and cost four-and-eightpence; and I wound up by telling him I meant every word I'd said. He's in Bursfield at this moment, you may bet, carting those orphans around into temporary quarters. And Elphinstone is a kind-hearted man, but orphans are not exactly his line—not what he'd call congenial to him."

"But these two? You seem to me pretty sure about finding them on Holmness: too sure, I suggest. Either you've forgotten to say why you're certain, or I may have missed——"

"You are getting keen, I see. No, I have no right to be sure, except that I rely on the girl—and on Hucks. (You ought to know Hucks, by the way; he is a warrior.) But I *am* sure: so sure that I have wired for a steam-launch to be ready by Clatworthy pier. . . . Will you come?"

"I propose to see this affair through," he said deliberately.

Miss Sally gave him a sharp look, and once again nodded approval.

"And, moreover, so sure," she went on, "that I have not wired to send Chichester in search. That's worrying me, I confess; for although Hucks is positive the girl would not start for Holmness without provisions—and on my reading of her, he's right—this is Tuesday, and they have been missing ever since Saturday night, or Sunday morning at latest."

"If that is worrying you," said Chandon, "it may ease your mind to know that there is food and drink on the Island. I built a cottage there two years ago,

with a laboratory; I spent six weeks in it this summer; and—well, ships have been wrecked on Holmness, and, as an old naval officer, I've provided for that sort of thing."

Miss Sally slapped her knee. (Her gestures were always unconventional.)

"We shall find 'em there!" she announced. "I'm willing to lay you five to one in what you like!"

They changed at Taunton for Fair Anchor. At Fair Anchor Station Sir Miles's motor awaited them. It had been ordered by Parson Chichester, instructed by telegram from Taunton.

The parson himself stood on the platform, but he could give no news of the missing ones.

"We'll have 'em before nightfall," promised Miss Sally. "Come with us, if you will."

So all three climbed into the motor, and were whirled across the moor, and down the steep descent into Clatworthy village, and by Clatworthy pier a launch lay ready for them with a full head of steam.

During the passage few words were said; and indeed the eager throb of the launch's engine discouraged conversation. Chandon steered, with his eyes fixed on the Island. Miss Sally, too, gazed ahead for the most part; but from time to time she contrived a glance at his weary face—grey even in the sunset towards which they were speeding.

Sunset lay broad and level across the Severn Sea, lighting its milky flood with splashes of purple, of lilac, of gold. The sun itself, as they approached the Island, dropped behind its crags, silhouetting them against a sky of palest blue.

They drove into its chill shadow, and landed on the very beach from which the children had watched the stag swim out to meet his death. They climbed up by a pathway winding between thorn and gorse, and on the ridge met the flaming sunlight again.

Miss Sally shielded her eyes.

"They will be here, if anywhere," said Sir Miles, and

led the way down the long saddle-back to the entrance of the gully.

"Hullo!" exclaimed he, coming to a halt as the chimneys of the bungalow rose into view above the gorse bushes. From one of them a steady stream of smoke was curling.

"It's a hundred to one!" gasped Miss Sally triumphantly.

They hurried down—to use her own expression—like a pack in full cry. It was Parson Chichester who claimed afterwards that he won by a short length, and lifting the latch, pushed the door open. And this was the scene he opened on, so far as it has since been reconstructed:—

Tilda stood with her back to the doorway and a couple of paces from it, surveying a table laid—so far as Sir Miles's stock of glass and cutlery allowed—for a dinner-party of eight. She was draped from the waist down in a crimson window-curtain, which spread behind her in a full-flowing train. In her hand she held her recovered book—the *Lady's Vade-Mecum;* and she read from it, addressing Arthur Miles, who stood and enacted butler by the side-table, in a posture of studied subservience.—

'Dinner bein' announced, the 'ostess will dismiss all care, or at least appear to do so: and, 'avin' marshalled 'er guests in order of precedence (*see page* 67 *supra*) *will take the arm of the gentleman favoured to conduct 'er. Some light and playful remark will 'ere be not out of place, such as*——"

"Well, I'm d——d, if you'll excuse me," ejaculated Miss Sally

Late that night, in his smoking-room at Meriton, Sir Miles Chandon knocked out the ashes of his pipe against the bars of the grate, rose, stretched himself, and looked about him. Matters had left a bedroom candle ready

to hand on a side-table, as his custom was. But Sir Miles took up the lamp instead.

Lamp in hand, he went up the great staircase, and along the unlit fifty yards of corridor to the room where his son lay. In all the great house he could hear no sound, scarcely even the tread of his own foot on the thick carpeting.

He opened the door almost noiselessly and stood by the bed, holding the lamp high.

But noiselessly though Sir Miles had come, the boy was awake. Nor was it in his nature, being awake, to feign sleep. He looked up, blinking a little, but with no fear in his gentle eyes.

His father had not counted on this. He felt an absurd bashfulness tying his tongue. At length he struggled to say—

"Thought I'd make sure you were comfortable. That's all."

"Oh, yes—thank you. Comfortable and—and—only just thinking a bit."

"We'll have a long talk to-morrow. That girl—she's a good sort, eh?"

"Tilda? . . . Why, of course, she did it *all*. She's the best in the world!"