raised her head and looked Rodney frankly in the face.

"At present, John," she said quietly, "I am the wife of Daniel Purcell, and as such have no right to contemplate any other marriage. But I will be honest with you. There is no reason why I should not be. You are quite right, John. I loved you in those days that you speak of, and if I never told you, you know why. You know how I came to marry Dan. It seemed to me then that I had no choice. Perhaps I was wrong, but I did what I thought was my duty to my father.

"In the years that have passed since then—the long, grey years—I have kept my covenant with Dan loyally in every respect. If I have ever looked back with regret, it has been in secret. But through those years you have been a faithful friend to me, and of all my friends the best beloved. And so you are now. That is all I can say, John."

"It is enough, Maggie," he said, "and I thank you from my heart for saying so much. Whatever your answer might have been, I would have done everything in my power to set you free. But now I shall venture to have a hope that I hold a stake in your freedom."

She made no answer to this, and for some time both sat silently engrossed with their own thoughts, and each thinking much the same thoughts as the other. The silence was at length broken by Rodney.

"It was an awful blow to me when I came home

from my travels and found you married. Of course, I guessed what had happened, though I never actually knew. I assumed that Dan had put the screw on your father in some way."

"Yes. He had lent my father money, and the bills could not be met."

"What a Juggernaut the fellow is!" exclaimed Rodney. "An absolutely ruthless egoist. By the way, was he in the habit of lending money? I notice that he refers in this letter to a person named Levy. Who is Levy? And what does Dan do for a livelihood? He is out of the paper trade, isn't he?"

"I think so. The truth is, I have never known what his occupation is. I have suspected that he is principally a money-lender. As to Mr. Levy, I have always thought he was a clerk or manager, but it rather looks as if he were a partner."

"We must find out," said Rodney. "And there is another thing that we must look into—that mysterious letter that Penfield received from Dan. Did you ever learn what was in it?"

"Never. Mr. Penfield refused to divulge the slightest hint of its contents. But I feel convinced that it was in some way connected with Dan's disappearance. You remember it arrived on the very day that Dan went away. I think Dr. Thorndyke called on Mr. Penfield to see if he could glean any information, but I assume that he didn't succeed."

"We can take that for granted," said Rodney.

"I don't think Thorndyke would get much out of a wary old bird like Penfield. But we must find out what was in that letter. Penfield will have to produce it if we put him in the witness-box, though he will be a mighty slippery witness. However, I will see Thorndyke and ask him about it when I have consulted Barnby. Perhaps I had better take charge of the letter."

Margaret handed him the letter, which he put securely in his wallet, and the plan of action being now settled, he stayed only for a little further gossip, and then took his leave.

On the following afternoon he called by appointment on Thorndyke, who, having admitted him, closed the "oak" and connected the bell with the laboratory upstairs, where his assistant, Polton, was at work.

"So," he said, "our fish has risen to the tin minnow, as I gather from your note."

"Yes. You have had better luck than I expected."

"Or than I deserved, you might have added if you had been less polite. Well, I don't know that I should agree. I consider it bad practice to treat an improbability as an impossibility. But what does he say?"

"All that we could wish—and perhaps a little more. That is the only difficulty. He makes things a little too easy for us—at least, that is my feeling. But you had better see the letter."

He took it from his wallet and passed it to Thorn-

dyke, who glanced at the post-mark, and when he had taken out the letter looked quickly into the interior of the envelope.

"Wivenhoe," he remarked. "Some distance from Woodbridge, but in the same district."

He read carefully through the text, noting at the same time the peculiarities that he had observed in the former letter. In this case, too, the post-marks had been made when the envelope was empty—a curious oversight on the part of Varney in view of the care and ingenuity otherwise displayed. Indeed, as he read through the letter, Thorndyke's opinion of that cunning artificer rose considerably. It was a most skilful and tactful production. It did certainly make things almost suspiciously easy, but then that was its function. The whole case for the petition rested on it. But the brutal attitude of the imaginary truant was admirably rendered, and, so far as he could judge, the personality of the missing man convincingly represented.

"It is not a courteous epistle," he remarked tentatively.

"No," agreed Rodney, "but it is exactly the sort of letter that one would expect from Purcell. It gives you his character in a nutshell."

This was highly satisfactory and very creditable to Varney.

"You mentioned in your note that you were going to take Barnby's opinion on it. Have you seen him?"

"Yes, and he thinks the same as I do: that it would be a little risky to base a petition on this letter alone. The judge might smell a rat. He considers that if we could produce evidence that Purcell is actually living with another woman, this letter would be good evidence of desertion. He suggested putting a private inquiry agent on Purcell's tracks. What do you say to that?"

"In the abstract it is an excellent suggestion. But how are you going to carry it out? You speak of putting the agent on Purcell's tracks. But there are no tracks. There is no place in which he is known to have been staying; there is no person known to us who has seen him since he landed at Penzance. You would start your sleuth without a scent to wander about Essex and Suffolk looking for a man whom he had never seen and would probably not recognize if he met him, and who is possibly not in either of those counties at all. It really is not a practicable scheme."

Rodney emitted a discontented grunt. "Doesn't sound very encouraging certainly," he admitted. "But how do the police manage in a case of the kind?"

"By having, not one agent but a thousand, and all in communication through a central office. And even the police fail if they haven't enough data. But with regard to Barnby, of course his opinion has great weight. He knows the difficulties of these cases, and his outlook will probably be the judge's outlook. But did you make clear to him

the peculiarities of this case?—the character of the petitioner, her excellent relations with her husband, the sudden, unforeseen manner of the disappearance, and the total absence of any grounds for a suspicion of collusion? Did you present these points to him?"

"No, I didn't. We merely discussed the letter."

"Well, see him again and put the whole case to him. My feeling is that a petition would probably succeed."

"I hope you are right," said Rodney, more encouraged than he would have liked to admit. "I'll see Barnby again. Oh, and there is another point. That letter that Purcell sent to Penfield by mistake in June. It probably throws some light on the disappearance, and might be important as evidence on our side. I suppose Penfield did not tell you what was in it or show it to you?"

"No, he would say nothing about it; but he allowed me, at my request, to examine the envelope."

Rodney grinned. "He might also have shown you the postman who delivered the letter. But if he won't tell us anything, we might put him in the witness-box and make him disgorge his secret."

"Yes, and you may have to if the court demands to have the letter produced. But I strongly advise you to avoid doing so if you can. I have the impression that the production of that letter would be very much the reverse of helpful—might, in

fact, be fatal to the success of the case and would in addition be very disagreeable to Mrs. Purcell."

Rodney looked at him in astonishment. "Then you know what was in the letter?" said he.

"No; but I have formed certain opinions which I have no doubt are correct, but which I do not feel at liberty to communicate. I advise you to leave Mr. Penfield alone. Remember that he is a lawyer, that he is Mrs. Purcell's friend, that he does know what is in the letter, and that he thinks it best to keep his knowledge to himself. But he will have to be approached on the question as to whether he is willing to act for Mrs. Purcell against her husband. If you undertake that office you can raise the question of the letter with him, but I would urge you most strongly not to force his hand."

Rodney listened to this advice with a slightly puzzled expression. Like Mr. Penfield, he viewed Thorndyke with mixed feelings, now thinking of him as an amateur, a doctor who dabbled ineffectively in law, and now considering the possibility that he might command some means of acquiring knowledge that were not available to the orthodox legal practitioner. Here was a case in point. He had examined the envelope of that mysterious letter "at his own request" and evidently for a specific purpose, and from that inspection he had in some unaccountable way formed a very definite opinion as to what the envelope had contained. That was very curious.

Of course, he might be wrong; but he seemed to be pretty confident. Then there was the present transaction. Rodney himself had rejected Varney's suggestion with scorn. But Thorndyke had adopted it quite hopefully, and the plan had succeeded in the face of all probabilities. Could it be that Thorndyke had some unknown means of gauging those probabilities? It looked rather like it.

"You are only guessing at the nature of that letter," he said tentatively, "and you may have guessed wrong."

"That is quite possible," Thorndyke agreed. "But Penfield isn't guessing. Put the case to him, hear what he says, and follow his advice. And if you see Barnby again it would be better to say nothing about that letter. Penfield will advise you to keep it out of the case if you can, and that is my advice, too."

When Rodney took his departure, which he did a few minutes later, he carried with him a growing suspicion that he had under-estimated Thorndyke; that the latter, perhaps, played a deeper game than at first sight appeared; and that he played with pieces unknown to traditional legal practice.

For some time after his visitor had left Thorndyke remained wrapped in profound thought. In his heart he was sensible of a deep distaste for this case that he was promoting. If it were to succeed, it could only be by misleading the court. It is true that the parties were acting in good faith, that the

falsities which they would present were falsities that they believed to be true. But the whole case was based on a fiction, and Thorndyke detested fictions. Nor was he satisfied with his own position in an ethical sense. He knew that the case was fictitious, that the respondent was a dead man, and that the documents to be produced in evidence were forgeries. He was, in fact, an accessory to those forgeries. He did not like it at all. And he was not so optimistic as to the success of the petition as he had led Rodney to believe, though he was not very uneasy on that score. What troubled him was that this was, in effect, a bogus case, and that he was lending it his support.

But what was the alternative? His thoughts turned to Margaret, sweet-faced, sweet-natured, gracious-mannered, the perfect type of an English gentlewoman; and he thought of the fine, handsome, high-minded gentleman who had just gone away. These two loved one another—loved as only persons of character can love. Their marriage, if it could be achieved, would secure to them a lifelong happiness, in so far as such happiness is attainable by mortals. But between them and their happiness stood the fiction of Daniel Purcell. In order that they might marry, Purcell must either be proved to be dead or assumed to be alive.

Could he be proved to be dead? If he could, that were the better way, because it would demon-

strate the truth. But was it possible? In a scientific sense it probably was. Science can accept a conclusion with reservations. But the law has to say "yes" or "no" without any reservations at all. This was not a case of death merely presumed. It was a death alleged to have occurred at a specific time and place and in a specific manner; and inseparably bound up with it was a charge of murder. If Purcell was dead, Varney had murdered him, and the murder was the issue that would be tried. But no jury would entertain for a moment the guilt of the accused on such evidence as Thorndyke could offer. And an acquittal would amount to a legal decision that Purcell was not dead. On that decision Margaret's marriage to Rodney would be impossible.

Thus Thorndyke's reflections led him back, as they always did, to the conclusion that Purcell's death was incapable of legal proof, and must ever remain so, unless by some miracle new and conclusive evidence should come to light. But to wait for a miracle to happen was an unsatisfactory policy. If Purcell could not be proved to be dead, and if such failure of proof must wreck the happiness of two estimable persons, then it would appear that it might be allowable to accept what was the actual legal position and assume that he was alive.

So, once again, Thorndyke decided that he had no choice but to continue to share with Varney the secret of Purcell's death and to hold his peace.

And if this must be, the petition must take its course, aided and abetted, if necessary, by him. After all, nobody would be injured and nothing done which was contrary either to public policy or private morals. There were only two alternatives, as matters stood. The fiction of Purcell as a living man would either keep Margaret and Rodney apart, as it was doing now, or it would be employed (with other fictions) to enable them to be united. And it was better that they should be united.

XIII In which the Medico-Legal Worm Arrives

ROMANCE lurks in unsuspected places. As we go our daily round, we are apt to look distastefully upon the scenes made dull by familiarity, and to seek distraction by letting our thoughts ramble far away into time and space, to ages and regions in which life seems more full of colour. In fancy, perchance, we thread the ghostly aisles of some tropical forest, or linger on the white beach of some lonely coral island, where the cocoanut palms, shivering in the sea breeze, patter a refrain to the song of the surf; or we wander by moonlight through the narrow streets of some Southern city and hear the thrum of the guitar

rise to the shrouded balcony; and behold! all the time Romance is at our very doors.

It was on a bright afternoon early in March that Thorndyke sat, with Philip Rodney by his side, on one of the lower benches of the lecture theatre of the Royal College of Surgeons. Not a likely place, this, to encounter Romance. Yet there it was—and Tragedy, too—lying unnoticed at present on the green baize cover of the lecturer's table, its very existence unsuspected.

Meanwhile Thorndyke and Philip conversed in quiet undertones, for it still wanted some minutes to the hour at which the lecture would commence.

"I suppose," said Philip, "you have had no report from that private detective fellow—I forget his name?"

"Bagwell. No, excepting the usual weekly note stating that he is still unable to pick up any trace of Purcell."

"Ah," commented Philip, "that doesn't sound encouraging. Must be costing a lot of money, too. I fancy my brother and Maggie Purcell are both beginning to wish they had taken your advice and relied on the letter by itself. But Jack was overborne by Barnby's insistence on corroborative evidence, and Maggie let him decide. And now they are sorry they listened to Barnby. They hadn't bargained for all this delay."

"Barnby was quite right as to the value of the additional evidence," said Thorndyke. "What he didn't grasp was the very great difficulty

of getting it. But I think I hear the big-wigs approaching."

As he spoke, the usher threw open the lecturer's door. The audience stood up, the president entered, preceded by the mace-bearer and followed by the officers and the lecturer, and took his seat; the audience sat down, and the lecture began without further formalities.

The theatre was nearly full. It usually was when Professor D'Arcy lectured; for that genial savant had the magnetic gift of infusing his own enthusiasm into the lecture and so into his audience, even when, as on this occasion, his subject lay on the outside edge of medical science. To-day he was lecturing on the epidermic appendages of the marine worms, and from the opening sentence he held his audience as by a spell, standing before the great blackboard with a bunch of coloured chalks in either hand, talking with easy eloquence —mostly over his shoulder—while he covered the black surface with those delightful drawings that added so much to the charm of his lectures. Philip watched his flying fingers with fascination, and struggled frantically to copy the diagrams into a large notebook with the aid of a handful of coloured pencils; while Thorndyke, not much addicted to note-taking, listened and watched with concentrated attention, mentally docketing and pigeon-holing any new or significant facts in what was to him a fairly familiar subject.

The latter part of the lecture dealt with those

beautiful sea worms that build themselves tubes to live in—worms like the Serpula, that make their shelly or stony tubes by secretion from their own bodies, or, like the Sabella or Terebella, build them up with sand-grains, little stones or fragments of shell. Each, in turn, appeared in lively portraiture on the blackboard, and the trays on the table were full of specimens which were exhibited by the lecturer, and which the audience were invited to inspect more closely after the lecture.

Accordingly, when the last words of the peroration had been pronounced, the occupants of the benches trooped down into the arena to look at the exhibits and seek further details from the genial Professor. Thorndyke and Philip held back for a while on the outskirts of the crowd; but the Professor had seen them on their bench, and now approached, greeting them with a hearty handshake and a facetious question.

"What are you doing here, Thorndyke? Is it possible that there are medico-legal possibilities even in a marine worm?"

"Oh, come, D'Arcy!" protested Thorndyke, "don't make me such a hidebound specialist. May I have no rational interests in life? Must I live for ever in the witness-box like a marine worm in its tube?"

"I suspect you don't get very far out of your tube," said the Professor, with a chuckle and a sly glance at Philip.

"I got far enough out last summer," retorted

Thorndyke, "to come and aid and abet you in your worm-hunting. Have you forgotten Cornwall?"

"No, to be sure," was the reply. "But that was only a momentary lapse, and I expect you had ulterior motives. However, the association of Cornwall, worm-hunting, and medical jurisprudence reminds me that I have something in your line. A friend of mine, who was wintering in Cornwall, picked it up on the beach at Morte Hoe and sent it to me. Now, where is it? It is on this table somewhere. It is a ridiculous thing—a small, flat cork, evidently from a zoologist's collecting-bottle, for it has a label stuck on it with the inscription 'Marine Worms.' It seems that our zoologist was a sort of Robinson Crusoe, for he had bored a couple of holes through it and evidently used it as a button. But the most ludicrous thing about it is that a Terebella has built its tube on it, as if the worm had been prowling about, looking for lodgings, and had read the label and forthwith had engaged the apartments. Ah! here it is."

He pounced on a little cardboard box, and, opening it, took out the cork button and laid it in Thorndyke's palm.

As the Professor was describing the object, Philip looked at him with a distinctly startled expression, and uttered a smothered exclamation. He was about to speak, but suddenly checked

himself and looked at Thorndyke, who flashed at him a quick glance of understanding.

"Isn't that a quaint coincidence?" chuckled the Professor—"I mean that the worm should have taken up its abode and actually built his tube on the label?"

"Very quaint," replied Thorndyke, still looking with deep interest at the object that lay in his hand.

"You realize," Philip said in a low voice, as the Professor turned away to answer a question, "that this button came from Purcell's oilskin coat?"

"Yes, I remember the incident. I realized what it was as soon as D'Arcy described the button."

He glanced curiously at Philip, wondering whether he, too, realized exactly what this queer piece of jetsam was. For to Thorndyke its message had been conveyed even before the Professor had finished speaking. In that moment it had been borne to him that the unlooked-for miracle had happened, and that Margaret Purcell's petition need never be filed.

"Well, Thorndyke," said the Professor, "my friend's treasure trove seems to interest you. I thought it would as an instance of the possibilities of coincidence. Quite a useful lesson to a lawyer, by the way."

"Exactly," said Thorndyke. "In fact, I was

going to ask you to allow me to borrow it to examine at my leisure."

The Professor was delighted. "There, now," he chuckled, with a mischievous twinkle at Philip, "what did I tell you? He hasn't come here for the comparative anatomy at all. He has just come to grub for legal data. And now, you see, the medico-legal worm has arrived, and is instantly collared by the medical jurist. Take him, by all means, Thorndyke. You needn't borrow him. I present him as a gift to your black museum. You needn't return him."

Thorndyke thanked the Professor, and, having packed the specimen with infinite tenderness in its cotton wool, bestowed the box in his waistcoat pocket. A few minutes later he and Philip took their leave of the Professor and departed, making their way through Lincoln's Inn to Chancery Lane.

"That button gave me quite a shock for a moment," said Philip, "appearing out of the sea on the Cornish coast; for, of course, it was on Purcell's coat when he went ashore—at least, I suppose it was. I understood Varney to say so."

"He did," said Thorndyke. "He mentioned the incident at dinner one evening, and he then said definitely that the cork button was on the coat when Purcell went up the ladder."

"Yes, and it seemed rather mysterious at first, as Purcell went right away from Cornwall. But there is probably quite a simple explanation. Purcell went to the East Coast by sea, and it is

most likely that, when he got on board the steamer, he obtained a proper button from the steward, cut off the jury button, and chucked it overboard. But it is a queer chance that it should have come back to us in this way."

Thorndyke nodded. "A very queer chance," he agreed.

As he spoke, he looked at Philip with a somewhat puzzled expression. He was, in fact, rather surprised. Philip Rodney was a doctor, a man of science, and an unquestionably intelligent person. He knew all the circumstances that were known, and he had seen and examined the button; and yet he had failed to observe the one vitally important fact that stared him in the face.

"What made you want to borrow the button?" Philip asked presently. "Was it that you wanted to keep it as a relic of the Purcell case?"

"I want to examine the worm-tube," replied Thorndyke. "It is a rather unusual one; very uniform in composition. Mostly, Terebella tubes are very miscellaneous as to their materials—sand, shell, little pebbles, and so forth. The material of this one seems to be all alike."

"Probably the stuff that the worm was able to pick up in the neighbourhood of Morte Hoe."

"That is possible," said Thorndyke; and the conversation dropped for a moment, each man occupying himself with reflections on the other.

To Philip it seemed rather surprising that a man like Thorndyke, full of important business,

should find time, or even inclination, to occupy himself with trivialities like this. For, after all, what did it matter whether this worm-tube was composed of miscellaneous gatherings or of a number of similar particles? No scientific interest attached to the question. It seemed rather a silly quest. And yet Thorndyke had thought it worth while to borrow the specimen for this very purpose.

Thorndyke, for his part, was more than ever astonished at the mental obtuseness of this usually acute and intelligent man. Not only had he failed in the first place to observe a most striking and significant fact: he could not see that fact even when his nose was rubbed hard on it.

As they passed through Old Buildings and approached the main gateway, Philip slowed down.

"I am going into my brother's chambers here to have tea with him. Do you care to join us? He will be glad to see you."

Thorndyke, however, was in no mood for tea and gossip. He had got a first-class clue—a piece of really conclusive evidence. How conclusive it was and how far its conclusiveness went he could not tell at present; and he was eager to get to work on the assay of this specimen in an evidential sense—to see exactly what was the amount and kind of evidence that the sea had cast up on the shore of Morte Hoe. He therefore excused himself, and having bidden Philip adieu, he strode out into Chancery Lane and bore south towards the Temple.

On entering his chambers, he discovered his assistant, Polton, in the act of transferring boiling water from a copper kettle to a small silver teapot; whereby he was able to infer that his approach had been observed by the said Polton from his lookout in the laboratory above. The two men, master and man, exchanged friendly greetings, and Thorndyke then observed:

"I have got a job to do later on, Polton, when I have finished up the evening's work. I shall want to grind some small sections of a mineral that I wish to identify. Would you put out one or two small hones and the other things that I shall need?"

"Yes, sir," replied Polton. "I will put the mineral section outfit on a tray and bring it down after tea. But can't I grind the sections? It seems a pity for you to be wasting your time on a mechanical job like that."

"Thank you, Polton," replied Thorndyke. "Of course you could cut the sections as well as, or better than, I can. But it is possible that I may have to produce the sections in evidence, and in that case it will be better if I can say that I cut them myself and that they were never out of my own hands. The courts don't know you as I do, you see, Polton."

Polton acknowledged the compliment with a gratified smile, and departed to the laboratory. As soon as he was gone, Thorndyke brought forth the little cardboard box, and, having taken out

the button, carried it over to the window, where, with the aid of his pocket lens, he made a long and careful examination of the worm-tube, the result of which was to confirm his original observation. The mineral particles of which the tube was built up were of various shapes and sizes, from mere sand-grains up to quite respectable little pebbles. But, so far as he could see, they were all of a similar material. What that material was an expert mineralogist would have been able, no doubt, to say offhand, and an expert opinion would probably have to be obtained. But in the meantime his own knowledge was enough to enable him to form a fairly reliable opinion when he had made the necessary investigations.

As he drank his tea, he reflected on this extraordinary windfall. Circumstances had conspired in the most singular manner against Varney. How much they had conspired remained to be seen. That depended on how much the worm-tube had to tell. But even if no further light were thrown on the matter by the nature of the mineral, there was evidence enough that Purcell had never landed at Penzance. The Terebella had already given that much testimony. And the cross-examination was yet to come.

Having finished tea, he fell to work on the reports and written opinions which had to be completed and sent off by the last post; and it was characteristic of the man that, though the button and its as yet half-read message lurked in the sub-

conscious part of his mind as the engrossing object of interest, he was yet able to concentrate the whole of his conscious attention on the matters with which he was outwardly occupied. Twice during the evening Polton stole silently into the room, once to deposit on a side-table the little tray containing the mineral section appliances, and the second time to place on a small table near the fire a large tray bearing the kind of frugal, informal supper that Thorndyke usually consumed when alone and at work.

"If you wait a few moments, Polton, I shall have these letters ready for the post. Then we shall both be free. I don't want to see anybody to-night unless it is something urgent."

"Very well, sir," replied Polton. "I will switch the bell on to the laboratory, and I'll see that you are not disturbed unnecessarily."

With this he took up the letters which Thorndyke had sealed and stamped and reluctantly withdrew, not without a last wistful glance at the apparatus on the tray.

As the door closed behind him, Thorndyke rose, and, bringing forth the button from the drawer in which he had bestowed it, began operations at once. First, with a pair of fine forceps he carefully picked off the worm-tube half a dozen of the largest fragments and laid them on a glass slide. This he placed on the stage of the microscope, and, having fitted on a two inch objective, made a preliminary inspection under various con-

ditions of light, both transmitted and reflected. When he had got clearly into his mind the general character of the unknown rock, he fetched from a store cabinet in the office a number of shallow drawers filled with labelled specimens of rocks and minerals, and he also placed on the table in readiness for reference one or two standard works on geology and petrology. But before examining either the books or the specimens in the drawers, he opened out a geological chart of the British Isles and closely scrutinized the comparatively small area with which the button was concerned —the Land's End and the north and south coast of Cornwall. A very brief scrutiny of the map showed him that the inquiry could now be narrowed down to a quite small group of rocks, the majority of which he could exclude at once by his own knowledge of the more familiar types; which was highly satisfactory. But there was evidently something more than this. Anyone who should have been observing him as he pored over the chart would have seen, by a suddenly increased attention, with a certain repressed eagerness, that some really illuminating fact had come into view; and his next proceedings would make clear to such an observer that the problem had already changed from one of search to a definite and particular identification.

From the chart he turned to the drawers of specimens, running his eye quickly over their contents, as if looking for some specific object;

and this object he presently found in a little cardboard tray—a single fragment of a grey, compact rock, which he pounced upon at once, and, picking it out of its tray, laid it on the slide with the fragment from the worm-tube. Careful comparison gave the impression that they were identical in character, but the great difference in the size of the fragments compared was a source of possible error. Accordingly, he wrapped the specimen lightly in paper, and with a hammer from the tool drawer struck it a sharp blow, which broke it into a number of smaller fragments, some of them quite minute. Picking out one or two of the smallest from the paper and carefully noting the "conchoidal" character of the fracture, he placed them on a separate slide, which he at once labelled "stock specimen," labelling the other slide "worm-tube." Having taken this precaution against possible confusion, he laid the two slides on the stage of the microscope and once more made a minute comparison. And again the conclusion emerged that the fragments from the worm-tube were identical in all their characters with the fragment of the stock specimen.

It now remained to test this conclusion by more exact methods. Two more labelled slides having been prepared, Thorndyke laid them, label downwards, on the table and dropped on each a large drop of melted Canada balsam. In one drop, while it was still soft, he immersed two or three fragments from the worm-tube; in the other a like

number of fragments of the stock specimen. Then he heated both slides over a spirit-lamp to liquefy the balsam and completely immerse the fragments, and laid them aside to cool while he prepared the appliances for grinding the sections.

This process was, as Polton had hinted, a rather tedious one. It consisted in rubbing the two slides backwards and forwards upon a wetted Turkey stone until the fragments of rock were ground to a flat surface. The flattened surfaces had then to be polished upon a smoother stone, and when this had been done the slides were once more heated over a spirit-lamp, the balsam liquefied, and each of the fragments neatly turned over with a needle on to its flat side. When the balsam was cool and set hard, the grinding process was repeated until each of the fragments was worn down to a thin plate or film with parallel sides. Then the slides were again heated, a fresh drop of balsam applied, and a cover-glass laid on top. The specimens were now finished and ready for examination.

On this, the final stage of the investigation, he bestowed the utmost care and attention. The two specimens were examined exhaustively and compared again and again by every possible method, including the use of the polariscope and the spectroscope, and the results of each observation were at once written down. Finally, Thorndyke turned to the books of reference, and, selecting a highly technical work on petrology, checked his written notes by the very detailed descriptions

that it furnished of rocks of volcanic origin. And once again the results were entirely confirmatory of the opinion that he had at first formed. No doubt whatever was left in his mind as to the nature of the particles of rock of which the worm had built its tube. But if his opinion was correct, he held evidence producible in a court of law that Daniel Purcell had never landed at Penzance ; that, in fact, his dead body was even now lying at the bottom of the sea.

As he consumed his frugal supper, Thorndyke turned over the situation in his mind. He had no doubts at all. But it would be necessary to get his identification of the rock confirmed by a recognized authority who could be called as a witness, and whose statement would be accepted by the court as establishing the facts. There was no difficulty about that. He had a friend who was connected with the Geological Museum, and who was recognized throughout the world as a first-class authority on everything relating to the physical and chemical properties of rocks and minerals. He would take the specimens to-morrow to this expert, and ask him to examine them ; and when the authoritative opinion had been pronounced, he would consider what procedure he should adopt. Already there was growing up in his mind a doubt as to the expediency of taking action on purely scientific evidence, and in answer to that doubt a new scheme began to suggest itself.

But for the moment he put it aside. The im-

portant thing was to get the expert identification of the rock, and so put his evidence on the basis of established fact. The conversion of scientific into legal evidence was a separate matter that could be dealt with later. And having reached this conclusion, he took a sheet of notepaper from the rack and wrote a short letter to his friend at the Museum, making an appointment for the following afternoon. A few minutes later he dropped it into the box of the Fleet Street post office, and for the time being dismissed the case from his mind.

XIV *In which Mr. Varney is Disillusioned*

THORNDYKE'S visit to the Geological Museum was not a protracted affair, for his friend, Mr. Burston, made short work of the investigation.

"You say you have examined the specimens yourself," said he. "Well, I expect you know what they are; just come to me for an official confirmation, h'm? However, don't tell me what your conclusion was. I may as well start with an open mind. Write it down on this slip of paper and lay it on the table face downwards. And now let us have the specimens."

Thorndyke produced from his pocket a cigar-case, from which he extracted a pill-box and the labelled microscope-slide.

"There are two little water-worn fragments in the pill-box," he explained, "and three similar ones which I have ground into sections. I am sorry the specimens are so small, but they are the largest I had."

Mr. Burston took the pill-box, and, tipping the two tiny pebbles into the palm of his hand, inspected them through a Coddington lens.

"M'yes," said he; "I don't think it will be very difficult to decide what this is. I think I could tell you offhand. But I won't. I'll put it through the regular tests and make quite sure of it; and meanwhile you had better have a browse round the Museum."

He bustled off to some inner sanctum of the curator's domain, and Thorndyke adopted his advice by straying out into the galleries. But he had little opportunity to study the contents of the cases, for in a few minutes Mr. Burston returned with a slip of paper in his hand.

"Now," he said facetiously, as they re-entered the room, "you see there's no deception."

He laid his slip of paper on the table beside Thorndyke's, and invited the latter to "turn up the cards." Thorndyke accordingly turned over the two slips of paper. Each bore the single word "phonolite."

"I knew you had spotted it," said Burston.

"However, you have now got corroborative evidence, and I suppose you are happy. I only hope I haven't helped to send some poor devil to chokee or worse. Good-bye. Glad you brought the things to me."

He restored the pill-box and slide, and having shaken hands heartily returned to his lair, while Thorndyke went forth into Jermyn Street and took his way thoughtfully eastward.

In a scientific sense the Purcell case was now complete. But the more he thought about it the more did he feel the necessity for bringing the scheme of evidence into closer conformity with traditional legal practice. Even to a judge a purely theoretical train of evidence might seem inconclusive; to a jury, who had been well pounded by a persuasive counsel, it would probably appear quite unconvincing. It would be necessary to obtain corroboration along different lines and in a new direction; and the direction in which it would be well to explore in the first place was the ancient precinct of Lincoln's Inn, where, at 62, Old Buildings, Mr. John Rodney had his professional chambers.

Now, at the very moment when Thorndyke was proceeding with swift strides from the neighbourhood of Jermyn Street towards Lincoln's Inn on business of the most critical importance to Mr. Varney, it was decreed by the irony of Fate that the latter gentleman should be engaged in bringing his affairs to a crisis of another kind. For

some time past he had been watching with growing impatience the dilatory proceedings of the lawyers in regard to Margaret's petition. Especially had he chafed at the farce of the private detective, searching, as he knew, for a man whose body was lying on the bed of the sea hundreds of miles away from the area of the search. He was deeply disappointed, too. For when his advertisement scheme had been adopted by Thorndyke, he had supposed that all was plain sailing; he had but to send the necessary letter, and the dissolution of the marriage could be proceeded with at once. That was how it had appeared to him. And as soon as the marriage was dissolved he would make his declaration, and in due course his heart's desire would be accomplished.

Very differently had things turned out. Months had passed, and not a sign of progress had been made. The ridiculous search for the missing man —ridiculous to him only, however—dragged on interminably, and made him gnash his teeth in secret. His omniscience was now a sheer aggravation; for it condemned him to look on at the futile activities that Barnby had suggested and Rodney initiated, recognizing all their futility, but unable to utter a protest. To a man of his temperament it was maddening.

But there was another source of trouble. His confidence in Margaret's feelings towards him had been somewhat shaken of late. It had seemed to him there had been a change in her bearing towards

him—a slight change, subtle and indefinable, but a change. She seemed as friendly, as cordial as ever; she welcomed his visits and appeared always glad to see him, and yet there was a something guarded, so he felt, as if she were consciously restraining any further increase of intimacy.

The thought of it troubled him profoundly. Of course, it might be nothing more than a little extra carefulness, due to her equivocal position. She had need to keep clear of anything in the slightest degree compromising; that he realized clearly. But still, the feeling lurked in his mind that she had changed, at least in manner, and sometimes he was aware of a horrible suspicion that he might have been over-confident. More than once he had been on the point of saying something indiscreet, and as time went on he felt ever growing a yearning to have his doubts set at rest.

On this present occasion he was taking tea with Margaret by invitation, with the ostensible object of showing her a set of etchings of some of the picturesque corners of Maidstone. He always enjoyed showing her his works, because he could see that she enjoyed looking at them; and these etchings of her native town would, he knew, have a double appeal.

"What a lovely old place it is!" she exclaimed, as she sipped her tea with her eyes fixed on the etchings that Varney had placed before her on a music-stand. "Why is it, Mr. Varney, that an etching or a drawing of any kind is so much more

like the place than a photograph? It can't be a question of accuracy, for the photograph is at least as accurate as a drawing, and contains a great deal more detail."

"Yes," agreed Varney, "and that is probably the explanation. An artist puts down what he sees and what anyone else would see and recognize. A photograph puts down what is there, regardless of how the scene would look to a spectator. Consequently, it is full of irrevelant detail, which gets in the way of the real effect as the eye would see it; and it may show appearances that the eye never sees at all, as in the case of Muybridge's instantaneous photographs of galloping horses. A photograph of a Dutch clock might catch the pendulum in the middle of its swing, and then the clock would appear to have stopped. But an artist would always draw it at the end of its swing, where it pauses for an instant, and that is where the eye sees it when the clock is going."

"Yes, of course," said Margaret; "and now I understand why your etchings of the old streets and lanes show just the streets and lanes that I remember, whereas the photographs that I have all look more or less strange and unfamiliar. I suppose they are full of details that I never noticed; but your etchings pick out and emphasize the things that I used to look at with pleasure and which live in my memory. It is a long time since I have been to Maidstone. I should like to see it again; indeed, I am not sure that, if I were free to choose, I

shouldn't like to live there again. It is a dear old town."

"Yes; isn't it? But you say 'if you were free to choose.' Aren't you free to choose where you will live?"

"In a sense I am, I suppose," she replied; "but I don't feel that I can make any definite arrangements for the future until—well, until I know what my own future is to be."

"But surely you know that now. You have got that letter of Dan's. That practically releases you. The rest is only a matter of time and legal formalities. If Jack Rodney had only got Penfield or some other solicitor to get the case started as soon as you had that letter, you would have had your decree by now and have been your own mistress. At least, that is my feeling on the subject. Of course, I am not a lawyer, and I may be wrong."

"I don't think you are," said Margaret. "I have thought the same all along, and I fancy Mr. Rodney is beginning to regret that he did not follow Dr. Thorndyke's advice and rely on the letter only. But he felt that he could hardly go against Mr. Barnby, who has had so much experience in this kind of practice. And Mr. Barnby was very positive that the letter was not enough."

"Yes, Barnby has crabbed the whole business; and now after all these months you are just where you were, excepting that you have dropped a lot of money on this ridiculous private detective. Can't you get Rodney to send the fellow packing and get the case started in earnest?"

"I am inclined to think that he is seriously considering that line of action, and I hope he is. Of course, I have not tried to influence him in the matter. It is silly for a lay person to embarrass a lawyer by urging him to do this or that against his judgment. But I must say that I have grown rather despondent as the time has dragged on and nothing has been done, and I shall be very relieved when a definite move is made. I have an impression that it will be quite soon."

"That is good hearing," exclaimed Varney, "because when a move is made it can't fail to be successful. How can it? On that letter Dan could offer no defence, and it is pretty obvious that he has no intention of offering any. And if there is no defence the case must go in your favour."

"Unless the judge suspects collusion, as Mr. Barnby seems to think he may."

"But," protested Varney, "judges don't give their decisions on what they suspect, do they? I thought they decided on the evidence. Surely collusion would have to be proved like anything else; and it couldn't be, because there has been no collusion. And I don't see why anyone should suspect that there has been."

"I agree with you entirely, Mr. Varney," said Margaret, "and I do hope you are right. You are making me feel quite encouraged."

"I am glad of that," said he, "and I am encouraging myself at the same time. This delay has been frightfully disappointing. I had hoped

that by this time the affair would have been over and you would have been free. However, we may hope that it won't be so very long now."

"It will take some months, in any case," said Margaret.

"Yes, of course," he admitted; "but that is a mere matter of waiting. We can wait patiently when we see the end definitely in view. And what a relief it will be when it is over! Just think of it! When the words are spoken and the shackles are struck off! Won't that be a joyful day?"

As Varney was speaking, Margaret watched him furtively and a little uneasily. For there had come into his face an expression that she had seen more than once of late—an expression that filled her gentle soul with forebodings of trouble for this impulsive, warm-hearted friend. And now the note of danger was heightened by something significant in the words that he had used—something that expressed more than mere friendly solicitude.

"It will certainly be a relief when the whole business is over," she said quietly; "and it is most kind and sympathetic of you to take such a warm interest in my future."

"It isn't kind at all," he replied, "nor particularly sympathetic. I feel that I am an interested party. In a sense, your future is my future."

He paused for a few moments, and she looked at him in something like dismay. Vainly she cast about for some means of changing the current of the conversation, of escaping to some less perilous

topic. Before she had time to recover from her confusion, he looked up at her and burst out passionately :

" Maggie, I want to ask you a question. I know I oughtn't to ask it, but you must try to forgive me. I can't bear the suspense any longer. I think about it day and night, and it is eating my heart out. What I want to ask you is this : When it is all over—when that blessed day comes and you are free, will you—can I hope that you may be willing to listen to me if I ask you to let me be your devoted servant, your humble worshipper, and to try to make up to you by love and faithful service all that has been missing from your life in the past? For years—for many years, Maggie—I have been your friend—a friend far more loving and devoted than you have ever guessed, for in those days I hardly dared to dream even of intimate friendship. But now the barrier between us is no longer immovable. Soon it will be cast down for ever. And then—can it be, Maggie, that my dream will come true? That you will grant me a lifelong joy by letting me be the guardian of your happiness and peace?"

For a moment there had risen to Margaret's face a flush of resentment, but it faded almost instantly and was gone, extinguished by a deep sense of the tragedy of this unfortunate but real and great passion. She had always liked Varney, and she had recognized and valued his quiet, unobtrusive friendship and the chivalrous deference with which he had been used to treat her. And

now she was going to make him miserable, to destroy his cherished hopes of a future made happy in the realization of his great love for her. The sadness of it left no room for resentment, and her eyes filled as she answered unsteadily :

"You know, Mr. Varney, that, as a married woman, I have no right to speak or think of the making of a new marriage. But I feel that your question must be answered ; and I wish, dear Mr. Varney, I wish from my heart that it could be answered differently. I have always valued your friendship—with very good reason ; and I value your love, and am proud to have been thought worthy of it. But I cannot accept it. I can never accept it. It is dreadful to me, dear friend, to make you unhappy—you whom I like and admire so much. But it must be so. I have nothing but friendship to offer you, and I shall never have."

"Why do you say you will never have, Maggie?" he urged. "May it not be that you will change? That the other will come if I wait long enough? And I will wait patiently—wait until I am an old man if need be, so that only the door is not shut. I will never weary you with importunities, but just wait your pleasure. Will you not let me wait and hope, Maggie?"

She shook her head sadly. "No, Mr. Varney," she answered. "Believe me, it can never be. There is nothing to wait for. There will be no change. The future is certain so far as that. I am so sorry, dear generous friend. It grieves me to the

heart to make you unhappy. But what I have said is final. I can never say anything different."

Varney looked at her in incredulous despair. He could not believe in this sudden collapse of all his hopes; for his doubts of her had been but vague misgivings, born of impatience and unrest. But suddenly a new thought flashed into his mind.

"How do you know that?" he asked. "Why are you so certain? Is there anything now that you know of that—that must keep us apart for ever? You know what I mean, Maggie. Is there anything?"

She was silent for a few moments. Naturally, she was reluctant to disclose to another the secret that she had held so long locked in her own heart, and that even now she dared but to whisper to herself. But she felt that to this man, whose love she must reject and whose happiness she must shatter, she owed a sacred duty. He must not be allowed to wreck his life if a knowledge of the truth would save him.

"I will tell you, Mr. Varney," she said. "You know how I came to marry Dan?"

"I think so," he replied. "He never told me, but I guessed."

"Well, if I had not married Dan I should have married John Rodney. There was no engagement and nothing was said; but we were deeply attached to one another, and we both understood. Then circumstances compelled me to marry Dan. Mr. Rodney knew what those circumstances were. He

cherished no resentment against me. He did not even blame me. He has remained my friend ever since, and he has formed no other attachment. I know that he has never forgotten what might have been, and neither have I. Need I say any more?"

Varney shook his head. "No," he replied gruffly. "I understand."

For some moments there was a deep silence in the room. Margaret glanced timidly at her companion, shocked at the sudden change in his appearance. In a moment all the enthusiasm, the eager vivacity, had died out of his face, leaving it aged, drawn, and haggard. He had understood, and his heart was filled with black despair. At a word all his glorious dream-castles had come crashing down, leaving the world that had been so sunny a waste of dust and ashes. So he sat for a while silent, motionless, stunned by the suddenness of the calamity. At length he rose and began, in a dull, automatic way, to collect his etchings and bestow them in his portfolio. When he had secured them and tied the ribbons of the portfolio, he turned to Margaret and, standing before her, looked earnestly in her face.

"Good-bye, Maggie," he said in a strange, muffled voice; "I expect I shan't see you again for some time."

She stood up, and with a little smothered sob held out her hand. He took it in both of his and, stooping, kissed it reverently.

"Good-bye again," he said, still holding her hand. "Don't be unhappy about me. It couldn't be helped. I shall often think of you and of how sweet you have been to me to-day; and I shall hope to hear soon that you have got your freedom. And I do hope to God that Rodney will make you happy. I think he will. He is a good fellow, an honest man, and a gentleman. He is worthy of you, and I wish you both long years of happiness."

He kissed her hand once more, and then, releasing it, made his way gropingly out into the hall and to the door. She followed him with the tears streaming down her face, and watched him, as she had watched him once before, descending the stairs. At the landing he turned and waved his hand, and even as she returned his greeting he was gone. She went back to the drawing-room still weeping silently, very sad at heart at this half-foreseen tragedy. For the time being, she could see, Varney was a broken man. He had come full of hope and he had gone away in despair; and something seemed to hint—it may have been the valedictory tone of his last words—that she had looked on him for the last time, that the final wave of his hand was a last farewell.

Meanwhile Varney, possessed by a wild unrest, hurried through the streets, yearning, like a wounded animal, for the solitude of his lair. He wanted to shut himself in his studio and be alone with his misery. Presently he hailed a taxicab, and from its window gazed out impatiently to measure its pro-

gress. Soon it drew up at the familiar entry, and when he had paid the driver he darted in and shut the door; but hardly had he attained the sanctuary that he had longed for than the same unrest began to engender a longing to escape. Up and down the studio he paced, letting the unbidden thoughts surge chaotically through his mind, mingling the troubled past with the future of his dreams—the sunny future that might have been—and this with the empty reality that lay before him.

On the wall he had pinned an early proof of the aquatint that Thorndyke had liked and that he himself rather liked. He had done it partly from bravado and partly as a memorial of the event that had set both him and Maggie free. Presently he halted before it and let it set the tune to his meditations. There was the lighthouse looking over the fog-bank just as it had looked on him when he was washing the bloodstain from the deck. By that time Purcell was overboard, at the bottom of the sea. His oppressor was gone. His life was now his own, and her life was her own.

He looked at the memorial picture, and in a moment it seemed to him to have become futile. The murder itself was futile, so far as he was concerned, though it had set Maggie free. To what purpose had he killed Purcell? It had been to ensure a future for himself; and behold! there was to be no future for him after all. Thus in the bitterness of his disappointment he saw everything out of proportion and in false perspective. He

forgot that it was not to win Margaret but to escape from the clutches of his parasite that he had pulled the trigger on that sunny day in June. He forgot that he had achieved the very object that was in his mind when he fired the shot: freedom to live a reputable life safe from the menace of the law. His passion for Margaret had become so absorbing that it had obscured all the other purposes of his life; and now that it was gone, it seemed to him that nothing was left.

As he stood thus gloomily reflecting with his eyes fixed on the little picture, he began to be aware of a new impulse. The lighthouse, the black-sailed luggers, the open sea, seemed to take on an unwonted friendliness. They were the setting of something besides tragedy. There, in Cornwall, he had been happy in a way despite the abiding menace of Purcell's domination. There, at Sennen, he had lived under the same roof with her, had sat at her table, had been her guest and her accepted friend. It had not really been a happy period, but memory, like the sundial, numbers only the sunny hours, and Varney looked back on it with wistful eyes. At least his dream had not been shattered then. So, as he looked at the picture, he felt stirring within him a desire to go back and look upon those scenes again. Falmouth and Penzance and Sennen—especially Sennen—seemed to draw him. He wanted to look out across the sea to the Longships, and in the gathering gloom of the horizon to see the diamond and the ruby

sparkle as they did that evening when he and the distant lighthouse seemed to hold secret converse.

It was, perhaps, a strange impulse. Whence it came he neither knew nor asked. It may have been the effect of memory and association. It may have been mere unrest. Or it may have been that a dead hand beckoned to him to come. Who shall say? He only knew that he was sensible of the impulse, and that it grew from moment to moment.

To a man in his condition, to feel an impulse is to act on it. No sooner was he conscious of the urge to go back and look upon the well-remembered scenes than he began to make his simple preparations for the journey. Like most experienced travellers he travelled light. Most of his kit, including his little case of sketching materials, was in the studio. The rest could be picked up at his lodgings *en route* for Paddington. Within ten minutes of his having formed the resolve to go, he stood on the threshold, locking the studio door from without with the extra key that he used when he was absent for more than a day. At the outer gate he paused to pocket the key, and stood for a few moments with his portmanteau in his hand, looking back at the studio with a curiously reflective air. Then, at last, he turned and went on his way. But if he could have looked, as the clairvoyant claims to look, through the bricks and mortar of London, he might at this very time have seen Dr. John Thorndyke striding up Chancery Lane from Fleet Street; might have followed him to the great

gateway of Lincoln's Inn (on the masonry whereof tradition has it that Ben Jonson worked as a bricklayer), and seen him pass through into the little square beyond, and finally plunge into the dark and narrow entry of one of the ancient red brick houses that have looked down upon the square for some three or four centuries—an entry on the jamb of which was painted the name of Mr. John Rodney.

But Varney was not a clairvoyant, and neither was Thorndyke. And so it befell that each of them went his way unconscious of the movements of the other.

XV *In which Thorndyke opens the Attack*

As Thorndyke turned the corner at the head of the stairs, he encountered Philip Rodney with a kettle in his hand, which he had apparently been filling at some hidden source of water.

"This is a bit of luck," said Philip, holding out his disengaged hand—"for me, at least; not, perhaps, for you. I have only just arrived, and Jack hasn't come over from the courts yet. I hope this isn't a business call."

"In a sense it is," replied Thorndyke, "as I am seeking information. But I think you can probably tell me all I want to know."

"That's all right," said Philip. "I'll just plant 'Polly' on the gas-stove, and while she is boiling we can smoke a preparatory pipe and you can get on with the examination-in-chief. Go in and take the presidential chair."

Thorndyke entered the pleasant, homely room, half office, half sitting-room, and seating himself in the big armchair began to fill his pipe. In a few moments Philip entered, and sat down on a chair which commanded a view of the tiny kitchen and of "Polly," seated on a gas-ring.

"Now," said he, "fire away. What do you want to know?"

"I want," replied Thorndyke, "to ask you one or two questions about your yacht."

"The deuce you do!" exclaimed Philip. "Are you thinking of going in for a yacht yourself?"

"Not at present," was the reply. "My questions have reference to that last trip that Purcell made in her, and the first one is: When you took over the yacht after that trip, did you find her in every respect as she was before? Was there anything missing that you could not account for, or any change in her condition, or anything about her that was not quite as you expected it to be?"

Philip looked at his visitor with undissembled surprise. "Now I wonder what makes you ask that. Have you any reason to expect that I should have found any change in her condition?"

"If you don't mind," said Thorndyke, "we will leave that question unanswered for the moment.

I would rather not say, just now, what my object is in seeking this information. We can go into that later. Meanwhile, do you mind just answering my questions as if you were in the witness-box?"

A shade of annoyance crossed Philip's face. He could not imagine what possible concern Thorndyke could have with his yacht, and he was inclined to resent the rather cryptic attitude of his questioner. Nevertheless, he answered readily:

"Of course I don't mind. But, in fact, there is nothing to tell. I don't remember noticing anything unusual about the yacht, and there was nothing missing, so far as I know."

"No rope or cordage of any kind, for instance?"

"No—at least, nothing to speak of. A new ball of spun-yarn had been broached. I noticed that, and I meant to ask Varney what he used it for. But there wasn't a great deal of it gone, and I know of nothing else. Oh, wait! If I am in the witness-box I must tell the whole truth, be it never so trivial. There was a mark or stain or dirty smear of some kind on the jib. Is that any good to you?"

"Are you sure it wasn't there before that day?"

"Quite. I sailed the yacht myself the day before, and I will swear that the jib was spotlessly clean then. So the mark must have been made by Purcell or Varney, because I noticed it the very next day."

"What was the mark like?"

"It was just a faint wavy line, as if some dirty water had been spilt on the sail and allowed to dry partly before it was washed off."

"Did you form any opinion as to how the mark might have been caused?"

Philip struggled, not quite successfully, to suppress a smile. To him there seemed something extremely ludicrous in this solemn interrogation concerning these meaningless trifles. But he answered as gravely as he could:

"I could only make a vague guess. I assumed that it was caused in some way by the accident that occurred. You may remember that the jib-halyard broke, and the sail went overboard and got caught under the yacht's forefoot. That is when it must have happened. Perhaps the sail may have picked some dirt off the keel. Usually a dirty mark on the jib means mud on the fluke of the anchor, but it wasn't that. The anchor hadn't been down since it was scrubbed. The yacht rode at moorings in Sennen Cove. However, there was the mark; how it came there you are as well able to judge as I am."

"And that is all you know; this mark on the sail and the spun-yarn? There is no other cordage missing?"

"No, not so far as I know."

"And there is nothing else missing? No iron fittings or heavy objects of any kind?"

"Good Lord, no! How should there be? You

don't suspect Purcell of having hooked off with one of the anchors in his pocket, do you?"

Thorndyke smiled indulgently, but persisted in his questions.

"Do you mean that you know there was nothing missing, or only that you are not aware of anything being missing?"

The persistence of the questions impressed Philip with a sudden suspicion that Thorndyke had something definite in his mind, that he had some reason for believing that something had been removed from the yacht. He ventured to suggest this to Thorndyke, who answered frankly enough:

"You are so far right, Philip, that I am not asking these questions at random. I would rather not say more than that just now."

"Very well," said Philip; "I won't press you for an explanation. But I may say that we dismantled the yacht in rather a hurry, and hadn't time to check the inventory, so I can't really say whether there was anything missing or not. But you have come at a most opportune time, for it happens that we had arranged to go over to the place where she is laid up, at Battersea, tomorrow afternoon for the very purpose of checking the inventory and generally overhauling the boat and the gear. If you care to come over with us, or meet us there, we can settle your questions quite definitely. How will that suit you?"

"It will suit me perfectly," replied Thorndyke.

"If you will give me the address and fix a time, I will meet you there."

"It is a disused wharf with some empty workshops," said Philip. "I will write down the directions, and if you will be at the gate at three o'clock to-morrow, we can go through the gear and fittings together."

Thorndyke made a note of the whereabouts of the wharf, and having thus despatched the business on which he had come, he took an early opportunity to depart, not having any great desire to meet John Rodney and be subjected to the inevitable cross-examination. He could see that Philip was, naturally enough, extremely curious as to the object of his inquiries, and he preferred to leave the two brothers to discuss the matter. On the morrow his actions would be guided by the results, if any, of the survey of the yacht.

Three o'clock on the following afternoon found him waiting at a large wooden gate in a narrow thoroughfare close to the river. On the pavement by his side stood the green canvas-covered "research case," which was his constant companion whenever he went abroad on professional business. It contained a very complete outfit of such reagents and apparatus as he might require in a preliminary investigation; but on the present occasion its usual contents had been reinforced by two large bottles, to obtain which Polton had that morning made a special visit to a wholesale chemist's in the Borough.

A church clock somewhere across the river struck the hour, and almost at the same moment John and Philip Rodney emerged from a tributary alley and advanced towards the gate.

"You are here first, then," said Philip, "but we are not late. I heard a clock strike a moment ago."

He produced a key from his pocket, with which he unlocked a wicket in the gate, and, having pushed it open, invited Thorndyke to enter. The latter passed through, and the two brothers followed, locking the wicket after them, and conducted Thorndyke across a large yard to a desolate-looking wharf, beyond which was a stretch of unreclaimed shore. Here, drawn up well above high-water mark, a small, sharp-sterned yacht stood on chocks under a tarpaulin cover.

"This is the yacht," said Philip, "but there is nothing on board of her. All the stores and gear and loose fittings are in the workshop behind us. Which will you see first?"

"Let us look at the gear," replied Thorndyke; and they accordingly turned towards a large disused workshop at the rear of the wharf.

"Phil was telling me about your visit last night," said Rodney, with an inquisitive eye on the research case, "and we are both fairly flummoxed. He gathered that these inquiries of yours are in some way connected with Purcell."

"Yes, that is so. I want to ascertain whether, when you resumed possession of the yacht after

Purcell left her, you found her in the same condition as before, and whether her stores, gear, and fittings were intact."

"Did you suppose that Purcell might have taken some of them away with him?"

"I thought it not impossible," Thorndyke replied.

"Now, I wonder why on earth you should think that," said Rodney, "and what concern it should be of yours if he had."

Thorndyke smiled evasively. "Everything is my concern," he replied. "I am an Autolycus of the Law, a collector of miscellaneous trifles of evidence and unclassifiable scraps of information."

"Well," said Rodney, with a somewhat sour smile, "I have no experience of legal curiosity shops and oddment repositories. But I don't know what you mean by 'evidence.' Evidence of what?"

"Of whatever it may chance to prove," Thorndyke replied blandly.

"What did you suppose Purcell might have taken with him?" Rodney asked, with a trace of irritability in his tone.

"I had thought it possible that there might be some cordage missing and perhaps some iron fittings or other heavy objects. But, of course, that is mere surmise. My object is, as I have said, to ascertain whether the yacht was in all respects in the same condition when Purcell left her as when he came on board."

Rodney gave a grunt of impatience; but at this moment Philip, who had been wrestling with a slightly rusty lock, threw open the door of the workshop, and they all entered. Thorndyke looked curiously about the long, narrow interior with its prosaic contents, so little suggestive of the tragedy which his thoughts associated with them. Overhead the yacht's spars rested on the tie-beams, from which hung bunches of blocks; on the floor reposed a long row of neatly painted half-hundredweights, a pile of chain cable, two anchors, a stove, and other oddments such as water-breakers, buckets, mops, etc.; and on the long benches at the side folded sails, locker cushions, sidelight lanterns, the binnacle, the cabin lamp, and other more delicate fittings. After a long look round, in the course of which his eye travelled along the row of ballast-weights, Thorndyke deposited his case on a bench and asked:

"Have you still got the broken jib-halyard that Philip was telling me about last night?"

"Yes," answered Rodney; "it is here under the bench."

He drew out a coil of rope, and, flinging it on the floor, began to uncoil it, when it separated into two lengths.

"Which are the broken ends?" asked Thorndyke.

"It broke near the middle," replied Rodney, "where it chafed on the cleat when the sail was hoisted. This is the one end, you see, frayed out

like a brush in breaking, and the other——" He picked up the second half, and passing it rapidly through his hands held up the end. He did not finish the sentence, but stood, with a frown of surprise, staring at the rope in his hand.

"This is queer," he said, after a pause. "The broken end has been cut off. Did you cut it off, Phil?"

"No," replied Philip; "it is just as I took it from the locker, where, I suppose, you or Varney stowed it."

"I wonder," said Thorndyke, "how much has been cut off. Do you know what the original length of the rope was?"

"Yes," replied Rodney; "forty-two feet. It is down in the inventory, but I remember working it out. Let us see how much there is here."

He laid the two lengths of rope along the floor, and with Thorndyke's spring tape carefully measured them. The combined length was exactly thirty-one feet.

"So," said Thorndyke, "there are eleven feet missing without allowing for the lengthening of the rope by stretching."

The two brothers glanced at one another, and both looked at Thorndyke with very evident surprise.

"Well," said Philip, "you seem to be right about the cordage. But what made you go for the jib-halyard in particular?"

"Because if any cordage had been cut off it

would naturally be taken from a broken rope in preference to a whole one."

"Yes, of course. But I can't understand how you came to suspect that any rope was missing at all."

"We will talk about that presently," said Thorndyke. "The next question is as to the iron fittings, chain, and so forth."

"I don't think any of those can be missing," said Rodney. "You can't very well cut a length of chain off with your pocket-knife."

"No," agreed Thorndyke, "but I thought you might have some odd piece of chain among the ballast."

"We have no chain except the cable. Our only ballast is in the form of half-hundredweights. They are handier to stow than odd stuff."

"How many half-hundredweights have you?"

"Twenty-four," replied Rodney.

"There are only twenty-three in that row," said Thorndyke. "I counted them as we came in and noted the odd number."

The two brothers simultaneously checked Thorndyke's statement and confirmed it. Then they glanced about the floor of the workshop, under the benches, and by the walls; but the missing weight was nowhere to be seen, nor was there any place in which an object of this size could have got hidden.

"It is very extraordinary," said Philip. "There is certainly one weight missing. And no one has

handled them but Jack and I. We hired a barrow and brought up all the gear ourselves."

"There is just the chance," said Thorndyke, "that one of them may have been overlooked and left in the yacht's hold."

"It is very unlikely," replied Philip, "seeing that we took out the floor-boards, so that you can see the whole of the bilges from end to end. But I will run down and make sure."

He ran out, literally, and crossing the wharf disappeared over the edge. In a couple of minutes he was back, breathing fast, and evidently not a little excited.

"It isn't there," he said. "Of course it couldn't be. But the question is, what has become of it? It is a most mysterious affair."

"It is," agreed Rodney. "And what is still more mysterious is that Thorndyke seemed to suspect that it was missing even before he came here. Now didn't you, Thorndyke?"

"I suspected that some heavy object was missing, as I mentioned," was the reply, "and a ballast-weight was a likely object. By the way, can you fix a date on which you know that all the ballast-weights were in place?"

"Yes, I think I can," replied Philip. "A few days before Purcell went to Penzance we beached the yacht to give her a scrape. Of course we had to take out the ballast, and when we launched her again I helped to put it back. I am certain that all the weights were there then,

because I counted them after they were stowed in their places."

"Then," said Thorndyke, "it is virtually certain that they were all on board when Purcell and Varney started from Sennen."

"I should say it is absolutely certain," said Philip.

Thorndyke nodded gravely and appeared to reflect a while. But his reflections were broken in upon by John Rodney.

"Look here, Thorndyke, we have answered your questions and given you facilities for verifying certain opinions that you held, and now it is time that you were a little less reserved with us. You evidently connected the disappearance of this rope and this weight in some way with Purcell. Now, we are all interested in Purcell. You have got something up your sleeve, and we should like to know what that something is. It is perfectly obvious that you don't imagine that Purcell, when he went up the pier ladder at Penzance, had a couple of fathoms of rope and a half-hundredweight concealed about his person."

"As a matter of fact," said Thorndyke, "I don't imagine that Purcell ever went up the ladder at Penzance at all."

"But Varney saw him go up," protested Philip.

"Varney says he saw him go up," Thorndyke corrected. "I do not accept Mr. Varney's statement."

"Then what on earth do you suggest?" demanded Philip. "And why should Varney say what isn't true?"

"Let us sit down on this bench," said Thorndyke, "and thrash the matter out. I will put my case to you, and you can give me your criticisms on it. I will begin by stating that some months ago I came to the conclusion that Purcell was dead."

Both the brothers started and gazed at Thorndyke in utter astonishment. Then Rodney said:

"You say 'some months ago.' You must mean within the last three months."

"No," replied Thorndyke. "I decided that he died on the 23rd of last June, before the yacht reached Penzance."

An exclamation burst simultaneously from both of his hearers, and Rodney protested impatiently:

"But this is sheer nonsense, if you will pardon me for saying so. Have you forgotten that two persons have received letters from him less than four months ago?"

"I suggest that we waive those letters and consider the other evidence."

"But we can't waive them!" exclaimed Rodney. "They are material evidence of the most conclusive kind."

"I may say that I have ascertained that both those letters were forgeries. The evidence can be produced, if necessary, as both the letters are in existence, but I don't propose to produce it now. I ask you to accept my statement for the time

being and to leave the letters out of the discussion."

"It is leaving out a good deal," said Rodney. "I find it very difficult to believe that they were forgeries or to imagine who on earth could have forged them. However, we won't contest the matter now. When did you come to this extraordinary conclusion?"

"A little over four months ago," replied Thorndyke.

"And you never said anything to any of us on the subject," said Rodney, "and, what is more astonishing, you actually put in an advertisement, addressed to a man whom you believed to be dead."

"And got an answer from him," added Philip, with a derisive smile.

"Exactly," said Thorndyke. "It was an experiment, and it was justified by the result. But let us get back to the matter that we have been investigating. I came to the conclusion, as I have said, that Purcell met his death during that voyage from Sennen to Penzance, and that Varney, for some reason, had thought it necessary to conceal the occurrence; but I decided that the evidence in my possession would not be convincing in a court of law."

"I have no doubt that you were perfectly right in that," Rodney remarked dryly.

"I further considered it very unlikely that any fresh evidence would ever be forthcoming, and that, since the death could not be proved, it was,

for many reasons, undesirable that the question should ever be raised. Accordingly, I never communicated my belief to anybody."

"Then," said Rodney, "are we to understand that some new evidence has come to light, after all?"

"Yes. It came to light the other day at the College of Surgeons. I dare say Philip told you about it."

"He told me that, by an extraordinary coincidence, that quaint button of Purcell's had turned up, and that some sort of sea-worm had built a tube on it. But if that is what you mean, I don't see the bearing of it as evidence."

"Neither do I," said Philip.

"You remember that Varney distinctly stated that when Purcell went up the ladder at Penzance he was wearing his oilskin coat, and that the button was then on it?"

"Yes. But I don't see anything in that. Purcell went ashore, it is true, and he went away from Cornwall. But he seems to have gone by sea, and, as I suggested the other day, he probably got a fresh button when he went on board the steamer and chucked this cork one overboard."

"I remember your making that suggestion," said Thorndyke, "and very much astonished I was to hear you make it. I may say that I have ascertained that Purcell was never on board that steamer."

"Well, he might have thrown it into the sea somewhere else. There is no particular mystery

about its having got into the sea. But what was there about my suggestion that astonished you so much?"

"It was," replied Thorndyke, "that you completely overlooked a most impressive fact which was staring you in the face and shouting aloud for recognition."

"Indeed!" said Philip. "What fact was it that I overlooked?"

"Just consider," replied Thorndyke, "what it was that Professor D'Arcy showed us. It was a cork button with a Terebella tube on it. Now an ordinary cork, if immersed long enough, will soak up water until it is waterlogged and then sink to the bottom. But this one was impregnated with paraffin wax. It could not get waterlogged and it could not sink. It would float for ever."

"Well?" queried Philip.

"But it *had* sunk. It had been lying at the bottom of the sea for months—long enough for a Terebella to build a tube on it. Then at last it had broken loose, risen to the surface and drifted ashore."

"You are taking the worm-tube as evidence," said John Rodney, "that the button had sunk to bottom. Is it impossible—I am no naturalist—but is it impossible that the worm could have built its tube while the button was floating about in the sea?"

"It is quite impossible," replied Thorndyke, "in the case of this particular worm, since the tube is built up of particles of rock gathered by the

worm from the sea bottom. You will bear me out in that, Philip?"

"Oh, certainly," replied Philip. "There is no doubt that the button has been at the bottom for a good many months. The question is how the deuce it can have got there, and what was holding it down."

"You are not overlooking the fact that it *is* a button," said Thorndyke—"I mean that it was attached to a garment?"

Both men looked at Thorndyke a little uncomfortably. Then Rodney replied:

"Your suggestion obviously is that the button was attached to a garment and that the garment contained a body. I am disposed to concede the garment, since I can think of no other means by which the button could have been held down, but I see no reason for assuming the body. I admit that I do not quite understand how Purcell's oil-skin coat could have got to the bottom of the sea, but still less can I imagine how Purcell's body could have got to the bottom of the sea. What do you say, Phil?"

"I agree with you," answered Philip. "Something must have held the button down, and I can think of nothing but the coat to which it was attached. But as to the body, it seems a gratuitous assumption, to say nothing of the various reasons for believing that Purcell is still alive. There is nothing wildly improbable in the supposition that the coat might have blown overboard and been sunk by something heavy in the pocket. As a

matter of fact, it would have sunk by itself as soon as it got thoroughly soaked. You must admit, Thorndyke, that that is so."

But Thorndyke shook his head. "We are not dealing with general probabilities," said he. "We are dealing with a specific case. An empty oilskin coat, even if sunk by some object in the pocket, would have been comparatively light, and, like all moderately light bodies, would have drifted about the sea bottom, impelled by currents and tide-streams. But that is not the condition in the present case. There is evidence that this button was moored immovably to some very heavy object."

"What evidence is there of that?" demanded Rodney.

"There is the conclusive fact that it has been all these months lying continuously in one place."

"Indeed!" said Rodney, with hardly concealed scepticism. "That seems a bold thing to say. But if you know that it has been lying all the time in one place, perhaps you can point out the spot where it has been lying."

"As a matter of fact I can," said Thorndyke. "That button, Rodney, has been lying all these months on the sea bottom at the base of the Wolf Rock."

The two brothers started very perceptibly. They stared at Thorndyke, then looked at one another, and then Rodney challenged the statement.

"You make this assertion very confidently," he said. "Can you produce any evidence to support it?"

"I can produce perfectly convincing and conclusive evidence," replied Thorndyke. "A very singular conjunction of circumstances enables us to fix with absolute certainty the place where that button has been lying. Do you happen to be acquainted with the peculiar resonant volcanic rock known as phonolite or clink-stone?"

Rodney shook his head a little impatiently. "No," he answered; "I have never heard of it before."

"It is not a very rare rock," said Thorndyke, "but in the neighbourhood of the British Isles it occurs in only two places. One is inland in the North, and may be disregarded. The other is the Wolf Rock."

Neither of his hearers made any comment on this statement, though it was evident that both were deeply impressed, and he continued:

"This Wolf Rock is a very remarkable structure. It is what is called a 'volcanic neck'—that is, it is a mass of altered lava that once filled the funnel of a volcano. The volcano has disappeared, but this cast of the funnel remains standing up from the bottom of the sea like a great column. It is a single mass of phonolite, and thus entirely different in composition from the sea bed around or anywhere near these islands. But, of course, immediately at its base the sea bottom must be covered with decomposed fragments which have fallen from its sides, and it is with these fragments that our Terebella has built its tube. You remember, Philip, my pointing out to you, as we

walked home from the College, that the worm-tube appeared to be built of fragments that were all alike. Now, that was a very striking and significant fact. It furnished *prima facie* evidence that the button had been moored in one place, and that it had therefore been attached to some very heavy object. That night I made an exhaustive examination of the material of the tube, and then the further fact emerged that the material was phonolite. This, as I have said, fixed the locality with exactness and certainty. And I may add that, in view of the importance of the matter in an evidential sense, I submitted the fragments yesterday to one of the greatest living authorities on petrology, who recognized them at once as phonolite."

For some time after Thorndyke had finished speaking the two brothers sat wrapped in silent reflection. Both were deeply impressed, but each in a markedly different way. To John Rodney, the lawyer, accustomed to sworn testimony and documentary evidence, this scientific demonstration appeared amazingly ingenious but somewhat fantastic and unconvincing. In the case of Philip, the doctor, it was quite otherwise. Accustomed to acting on inferences from facts of his own observing, he gave full weight to each item of evidence, and his thoughts were already stretching out to the as yet unstated corollaries.

John Rodney was the first to speak. "What inference," he asked, "do you wish us to draw from this very ingenious theory of yours?"

"It is rather more than a theory," said Thorndyke, "but we will let that pass. The inference I leave to you; but perhaps it would help you if I were to recapitulate the facts."

"Perhaps it would," said Rodney.

"Then," said Thorndyke, "I will take them in their order. This is the case of a man who was seen to start on a voyage for a given destination in company with one other man. His start out to sea was witnessed by a number of persons. From that moment he was never seen again by any person excepting his one companion. He is said to have reached his destination, but his arrival there rests upon the unsupported verbal testimony of one person, the said companion. Thereafter he vanished utterly, and since then has made no sign of being alive; he has drawn no cheques, though he has a considerable balance at his bank; he has communicated with no one, and he has never been seen by anybody who could recognize him."

"Is that quite correct?" interposed Philip. "He is said to have been seen at Falmouth and Ipswich, and then there are those letters."

"His alleged appearance, embarking at Falmouth and disembarking at Ipswich," replied Thorndyke, "rest, like his arrival at Penzance, upon the unsupported testimony of one person, his sole companion on the voyage. That statement I can prove to be untrue. He was never seen either at Falmouth or at Ipswich. As to the letters, I can prove them both to be forgeries,

and for the present I ask you to admit them as such pending the production of proof. But if we exclude the alleged appearances and the letters, what I have said is correct: from the time when this man put out to sea from Sennen he has never been seen by anyone but Varney, and there has never been any corroboration of Varney's statement that he landed at Penzance.

"Some eight months later a portion of this man's clothing is found. It bears evidence of having been lying at the bottom of the sea for many months, so that it must have sunk to its resting-place within a very short time of the man's disappearance. The place where it has been lying is one over, or near, which the man must have sailed in the yacht. It has been moored to the bottom by some very heavy object, and a very heavy object has disappeared from the yacht. That heavy object had apparently not disappeared when the yacht started, and it is not known to have been on the yacht afterwards. The evidence goes to show that the disappearance of that object coincided in time with the disappearance of the man, and a quantity of cordage disappeared certainly on that day.

"Those are the facts at present in our possession with regard to the disappearance of Daniel Purcell, to which we may add that the disappearance was totally unexpected, that it has never been explained or accounted for excepting in a letter which is a manifest forgery, and that even in the latter,

apart from the fictitious nature of the letter, the explanation is utterly inconsistent with all that is known of the missing man in respect of his character, his habits, his intentions, and his circumstances."

XVI *In which John Rodney is Convinced*

ONCE more, as Thorndyke concluded, there was a long, uncomfortable silence, during which the two brothers cogitated profoundly and with a very disturbed expression. At length John Rodney spoke.

"There is no denying, Thorndyke, that the body of circumstantial evidence that you have produced and expounded so skilfully and lucidly is extraordinarily complete. Of course, it is subject to your being able to prove that Varney's reports as to Purcell's appearance at Falmouth and Ipswich were false reports, and that the letters which purported to be written and sent by Purcell were in fact not written or sent by him. If you can prove those assertions, there will undoubtedly be a very formidable case against Varney, because those reports and those letters would then be evidence that someone was endeavouring to prove, falsely, that Purcell is alive. But this would amount to presumptive evidence that he is not alive, and that someone has reasons for concealing the fact of his death. But we must look to you to prove what you have asserted. You could hardly suggest that

we should charge a highly respectable gentleman of our acquaintance with having murdered his friend and made away with the body—for that is obviously your meaning—on a mass of circumstantial evidence, which is, you must admit, rather highly theoretical."

"I agree with you completely," replied Thorndyke. "The evidence respecting the reports and the letters is obviously essential. But in the meantime it is of the first importance that we carry this investigation to an absolute finish. It is not merely a question of justice or our duty on grounds of public policy to uncover a crime and secure the punishment of the criminal. There are individual rights and interests to be guarded—those, I mean, of the missing man's wife. If her husband is dead, common justice to her demands that his death should be proved and placed on public record."

"Yes, indeed," Rodney agreed heartily. "If Purcell is dead, then she is a widow, and the petition becomes unnecessary. By the way, I understand now why you were always so set against the private detective, but what I don't understand is why you put in that advertisement."

"It is quite simple," was the reply. "I wanted another forged letter, written in terms dictated by myself—and I got it."

"Ha!" exclaimed Rodney. And now, for the first time, he began to understand how Thorndyke had got his great reputation.

"You spoke just now," Rodney continued, "of carrying this investigation to a finish. Haven't you done so? Is there anything more to investigate?"

"We have not yet completed our examination of the yacht," replied Thorndyke. "The facts that we have elicited enable us to make certain inferences concerning the circumstances of Purcell's death—assuming his death to have occurred. We infer, for instance, that he did not fall overboard, nor was he pushed overboard. He met his death on the yacht, and it was his dead body which was cast into the sea with the sinker attached to it. That we may fairly infer. But we have, at present, no evidence as to the way in which he came by his death. Possibly a further examination of the yacht may show some traces from which we may form an opinion. By the way, I have been looking at that revolver that is hanging from the beam. Was that on board at the time?"

"Yes," answered Rodney. "It was hanging on the cabin bulkhead. Be careful," he added, as Thorndyke lifted it from its hook. "I don't think it has been unloaded."

Thorndyke opened the breech of the revolver, and, turning out the cartridges into his hand, peered down the barrel and into each chamber separately. Then he looked at the cartridges in his hand.

"This seems a little odd," he remarked. "The barrel is quite clean and so is one chamber, but the other five chambers are extremely foul. And I notice that the cartridges are not all alike. There are five Eleys and one Curtis and Harvey. That is quite a suggestive coincidence."

Philip looked with a distinctly startled expression at the little heap of cartridges in Thorndyke's hand,

and, picking out the odd one, examined it with knitted brows.

"When did you fire the revolver last, Jack?" he asked, looking up at his brother.

"On the day when we potted at those champagne bottles," was the reply.

Philip raised his eyebrows. "Then," said he, "this is a very remarkable affair. I distinctly remember on that occasion, when we had sunk all the bottles, reloading the revolver with Eleys, and that there were then three cartridges left over in the bag. When I had loaded I opened the new box of Curtis and Harvey's, tipped them into the bag, and threw the box overboard."

"Did you clean the revolver?" asked Thorndyke.

"No, I didn't. I meant to clean it later, but forgot to."

"But," said Thorndyke, "it has undoubtedly been cleaned, and very thoroughly as to the barrel and one chamber. Shall we check the cartridges in the bag? There ought to be forty-nine Curtis and Harveys and three Eleys if what you have told us is correct."

Philip searched among the raffle on the bench, and presently unearthed a small linen bag. Untying the string, he shot out on the bench a heap of cartridges, which he counted one by one. There were fifty-two in all, and three of them were Eleys.

"Then," said Thorndyke, "it comes to this: since you used that revolver it has been used by someone else. That someone fired only a single shot, after which he carefully cleaned the barrel

and the empty chamber and reloaded. Incidentally, he seems to have known where the cartridge-bag was kept, but he did not know about the change in the make of cartridges or that the revolver had not been cleaned. You notice, Rodney," he added, "that the circumstantial evidence accumulates."

"I do, indeed," Rodney replied gloomily. "Is there anything else that you wish to examine?"

"Yes; there is the sail. Philip mentioned a stain on the jib. Shall we see if we can make anything of that?"

"I don't think you will make much of it," said Philip. "It is very faint. However, you shall see it and judge for yourself."

He picked out one of the bundles of white duck, and while he was unfolding it Thorndyke dragged an empty bench into the middle of the floor under the skylight. Over this the sail was spread so that the mysterious mark was in the middle of the bench. It was very inconspicuous—just a faint grey-green, wavy line, like the representation of an island on a map. The three men looked at it curiously for a few moments, then Thorndyke asked:

"Would you mind if I made a further stain on the sail? I should like to apply some reagents."

"Of course you must do what is necessary," said Rodney. "The evidence is more important than the sail."

On this Thorndyke opened his research case and brought forth the two bottles that Polton had procured from the Borough, of which one was labelled "Tinct. Guaiaci Dil." and the other "Æther

Ozon." As they emerged from the case, Philip read the labels with evident surprise, remarking:

"I shouldn't have thought that the guaiacum test would be of any use after all these months, especially as the sail seems to have been scrubbed."

"It will act, I think, if the pigment or its derivatives is there," said Thorndyke; and as he spoke he poured a quantity of the tincture on the middle of the stained area. The pool of liquid rapidly spread considerably beyond the limits of the stain, growing paler as it extended. Then Thorndyke cautiously dropped small quantities of the ozonic ether at various points around the stained area, and watched closely as the two liquids mingled in the fabric of the sail. Gradually the ether spread towards the stain, and, first at one point and then at another, approached and finally crossed the wavy grey line; and at each point the same change occurred: first the faint grey line turned into a strong blue line, and then the colour extended to the enclosed space until the entire area of the stain stood out a conspicuous blue patch. Philip and Thorndyke looked at one another significantly, and the latter said: "You understand the meaning of this reaction, Rodney; this is a bloodstain, and a very carefully washed bloodstain."

"So I supposed," Rodney replied; and for a while no one spoke.

There was something very dramatic and solemn, they all felt, in the sudden appearance of this staring blue patch on the sail with the sinister message that it brought. But what followed was

more dramatic still. As they stood silently regarding the blue stain, the mingled liquids continued to spread; and suddenly, at the extreme edge of the wet area, they became aware of a new spot of blue. At first a mere speck, it grew slowly, as the liquid spread over the canvas, into a small oval, and then a second spot appeared by its side. At this point Thorndyke poured out a fresh charge of the tincture, and when it had soaked into the cloth cautiously applied a sprinkling of ether. Instantly the blue spots began to elongate; fresh spots and patches appeared, and as they ran together there sprang out of the blank surface the clear impression of a hand—a left hand, complete in all its details excepting the third finger, which was represented by a round spot at some two-thirds of its length.

The dreadful significance of this apparition, and the uncanny and mysterious manner of its emergence from the white surface, produced a most profound impression on all the observers, but especially on Rodney, who stared at it with an expression of the utmost horror, but spoke not a word. His brother was hardly less appalled, and when he at length spoke it was in a hushed voice that was little above a whisper.

"It is horrible," he murmured. "It seems almost supernatural, that accusing hand springing into existence out of the blank surface after all this time. I wonder," he added, after a pause, "why the third finger made no mark, seeing that the others are so distinct."

"I think," said Thorndyke, "that the impres-

sion is there. That small round spot looks like the mark of a finger-tip, and its position rather suggests a finger with a stiff joint."

As he made this statement, both brothers simultaneously uttered a smothered exclamation.

"It is Varney's hand!" gasped Philip. "You recognize it, Jack, don't you? That is just where the tip of his stiff finger would come. Have you ever noticed Varney's left hand, Thorndyke?"

"You mean the ankylosed third finger? Yes; and I agree with you that this is undoubtedly the print of Varney's hand."

"Then," said Rodney, "the case is complete. There is no need for any further investigation. On the evidence that is before us, to say nothing of the additional evidence that you can produce, there cannot be the shadow of a doubt that Purcell was murdered by Varney and his body sunk in the sea. You agree with me, I am sure, Thorndyke?"

"Certainly," was the reply. "I consider the evidence so far conclusive that I have not the slightest doubt on the subject."

"Very well," said Rodney. "Then the next question is, what is to be done? Shall I lay a sworn information or will you? Or had we better go to the police together and make a joint statement?"

"Whatever we do," replied Thorndyke, "don't let us be premature. The evidence, as you say, is perfectly convincing. It leaves us with no doubt as to what happened on that day last June. It would probably be, in an intellectual sense, quite convincing to a judge. It might even be to a jury.

But would it be sufficient to secure a conviction? I think it extremely doubtful."

"Do you really?" exclaimed Philip. "I should have thought it impossible that anyone who had heard the evidence could fail to come to the inevitable conclusion."

"You are probably right," said Thorndyke. "But a jury who are trying an accused person on a capital charge have got to arrive at something more than a belief that the accused is guilty. They have got to be convinced that there is, humanly speaking, no possible doubt as to the prisoner's guilt. No jury would give an adverse verdict on a balance of probabilities, nor would any judge encourage them to do so."

"But surely," said Philip, "this is something more than a mere balance of probabilities. The evidence all points in the same direction, and there is nothing to suggest a contrary conclusion."

Thorndyke smiled dryly. "You might think differently after you have heard a capable counsel for the defence. But the position is this: we are dealing with a charge of murder. Now, in order to prove that a particular person is guilty of murder it is necessary first to establish the *corpus delicti*, as the phrase goes—that is, to prove that a murder has been committed by someone. But the proof that a person has been murdered involves the antecedent proof that he is dead. If there is any doubt that the alleged deceased is dead, no murder charge can be sustained. But proof of death usually involves the production of the body or of

some identifiable part of it, or at least the evidence of some person who has seen it and can swear to its identity. There are exceptional cases, of course, and this might be accepted as one. But you can take it that the inability of the prosecution to produce the body or any part of it, or any witness who can testify to having seen it, or any direct evidence that the person alleged to have been murdered is actually dead, would make it extremely difficult to secure the conviction of the accused."

"Yes, I see that," said Philip. "But, after all, that is not our concern. If we give the authorities all the information that we possess, we shall have done our duty as citizens. As to the rest, we must leave the court to convict or acquit, according to its judgment."

"Not at all," Thorndyke dissented. "You are losing sight of our position in the case. There are two different issues, which are, however, inseparably connected. One is the fact of Purcell's death, the other is Varney's part in compassing it. Now it is the first issue that concerns us, or at least concerns me. If we could prove that Purcell is dead without bringing Varney into it at all, I should be willing to do so; for I strongly suspect that there were extenuating circumstances."

"So do I," said Rodney. "Purcell was a brute, whereas Varney has always seemed to be a perfectly decent, gentlemanly fellow."

"That is the impression that I have received," said Thorndyke, "and I feel no satisfaction in proceeding against Varney. My purpose all along has

been, not to convict Varney but to prove that Purcell is dead. And that is what we have to do now, for Margaret Purcell's sake. But we cannot leave Varney out of the case. For if Purcell is dead, he is dead because Varney killed him; and our only means of proving his death is to charge Varney with having murdered him. But if we charge Varney we must secure a conviction. We cannot afford to fail. If the court is convinced that Purcell is dead, it will convict Varney, for the evidence of his death is evidence of his murder; but if the court acquits Varney, it can do so only on the ground that there is no conclusive evidence that Purcell is dead. Varney's acquittal would therefore leave Margaret Purcell still bound by law to a hypothetical husband, with the insecure chance of obtaining her release at some future time either by divorce or presumption of death. That would not be fair to her. She is a widow, and she is entitled to have her status acknowledged."

Rodney nodded gloomily. A consciousness of what he stood to gain by Varney's conviction lent an uncomfortable significance to Thorndyke's words.

"Yes," he agreed, half reluctantly, "there is no denying the truth of what you say, but I wish it might have been the other way about. If Purcell had murdered Varney I could have raised the hue and cry with a good deal more enthusiasm. I knew both the men well, and I liked Varney but detested Purcell. Still, one has to accept the facts."

"Exactly," said Thorndyke, who had realized

and sympathized with Rodney's qualms. "The position is not of our creating, and whatever our private sentiments may be, the fact remains that a man who elects to take the life of another must accept the consequences. That is Varney's position so far as we can see, and if he is innocent it is for him to clear himself."

"Yes, of course," Rodney agreed; "but I wish the accusation had come through different channels."

"So do I," said Philip. "It is horrible to have to denounce a man with whom one has been on terms of intimate friendship. But apparently Thorndyke considers that we should not denounce him at present. That is what I don't quite understand. You seemed to imply, Thorndyke, that the case was not complete enough to warrant our taking action, and that some further evidence ought to be obtained in order to make sure of a conviction. But what further evidence is it possible to obtain?"

"My feeling," replied Thorndyke, "is that the case is at present, as your brother expressed it just now, somewhat theoretical, or, rather, hypothetical. The evidence is circumstantial from beginning to end. There is not a single item of direct evidence to furnish a starting-point. It would be insisted by the defence that Purcell's death is a matter of mere inference, and that you cannot convict a man of the murder of another who may conceivably be still alive. We ought, if possible, to put Purcell's death on the basis of demonstrable fact."

"But how is that possible?" demanded Philip.

"The conclusive method of proving the death of a person is, as I have said, to produce that person's body or some recognizable part of it."

"But Purcell's body is at the bottom of the sea."

"True. But we know its whereabouts. It is a small area, with the lighthouse as a landmark. If that area were systematically worked over with a trawl or dredge, or, better still, with a set of creepers attached to a good-sized spar, there should be a very fair chance of recovering the body, or at least the clothing and the weight."

Philip reflected for a few moments. "I think you are right," he said at length. "The body appears, from what you say, to be quite close to the Wolf Rock, and almost certainly on the east side. With a good compass and the lighthouse as a sailing mark, it would be possible to ply up and down and search every inch of the bottom in the neighbourhood of the Rock."

"There is only one difficulty," said Rodney. "Your worm-tube was composed entirely of fragments of the Rock. But how large an area of the sea bottom is covered with those fragments? We should have to ascertain that if we are to work over the whole of it."

"It would not be difficult to ascertain," replied Thorndyke. "If we take soundings with a hand-lead as we approach the Rock, the samples that come up on the arming of the lead will tell us when we are over a bottom covered with phonolite débris."

"Yes," Rodney agreed, "that will answer if the depth is within the range of a hand-lead. If it isn't we shall have to rig the tackle for a deep-sea lead. It will be rather a gruesome quest. Do I gather that you are prepared to come down with us and lend a hand? I hope you are."

"So do I!" exclaimed Philip. "We shall be quite at home with the navigation, but if—er—if anything comes up on the creepers, it will be a good deal more in your line than ours."

"I should certainly wish to come," said Thorndyke, "and, in fact, I think it rather desirable that I should, as Philip suggests. But I can't get away from town just at present, nor, I imagine, can you. We had better postpone the expedition for a week or so until the commencement of the spring vacation. That will give us time to make the necessary arrangements, to charter a suitable boat, and so forth. And, in any case, we shall have to pick our weather, having regard to the sort of sea that one may encounter in the neighbourhood of the Wolf."

"Yes," agreed Philip, "it will have to be a reasonably calm day when we make the attempt, so I suggest that we put it off until you and Jack are free; and meanwhile I will get on with the preliminary arrangements, the hiring of the boat and getting together the necessary gear."

While they had been talking the evening had closed in, and the workshop was now almost in darkness. It being too late for the brothers to carry out the business that had brought them to the

wharf, even if they had been in a state of mind suitable to the checking of inventories, they postponed the survey to a later date, locked up the workshop, and in company with Thorndyke made their way homeward.

XVII In which there is a Meeting and a Farewell

IT was quite early on a bright morning at the beginning of April when Thorndyke and the two Rodneys took their way from their hotel towards the harbour of Penzance. Philip had been in the town for a day or two, completing the arrangements for the voyage of exploration ; the other two had come down from London only on the preceding evening.

"I hope the skipper will be punctual," said Philip. "I told him to meet us on the pier at eight o'clock sharp. We want to get off as early as possible, for it is a longish run out to the Rock, and we may have to make a long day of it."

"We probably shall," said Rodney. "The Wolf Rock is a good departure for purposes of navigation, but when it comes to finding a spot of sea bottom only a foot or two in extent, our landmark isn't very exact. It will take us a good many hours to search the whole area."

"I wonder," said Thorndyke, "what took them out there. According to Varney's description and the evidence of the button, they must have had

the Rock close aboard. But it was a good deal out of their way from Sennen to Penzance."

"It was," agreed Philip. "But you can't make a bee-line in a sailing craft. That's why I chartered a motor-boat for this job. Under canvas you can only keep as near to your course as the wind will let you. But Purcell was a deuce of a fellow for sea room. He always liked to keep a good offing. I remember that on that occasion he headed straight out to sea and got well outside the Longships before he turned south. I watched the yacht from the shore, and wondered how much longer he was going to hold on. It looked as if he were heading for America. Then, you remember, the fog came down, and they may have lost their bearings a bit; and the tides are pretty strong about here."

"Yes," said Thorndyke, "and as we may take it that the trouble, whatever it was, came to a head while they were enveloped in fog, it is likely that the yacht was left to take care of herself for a time, and may have drifted a good deal off her course. At any rate, it is clear that at one time she had the Rock right under her lee, and must have drifted past within a few feet."

"It would have been a quaint position," said Philip, "if she had bumped on to it and gone to the bottom. Then they would have kept one another company in Davy Jones's locker."

"It would have saved a lot of trouble if they had gone down together," his brother remarked.

"But from what you have just said, Thorndyke, it seems that you have a more definite idea as to the position of the body than I thought. Where do you suppose it to be?"

"Judging from all the facts taken together," replied Thorndyke, "I should say that it is lying close to the base of the Rock on the east side. We have it from Varney that the yacht drifted down towards the Rock during the fog, and I gathered that she drifted past close to the east side. And we also learned from him that the jib had then come down, which was, in fact, the cause of her being adrift. But the bloodstains on the sail prove that the tragedy occurred either before the halyard broke or while the sail was down—almost certainly the latter. And we may take it that it occurred during the fog; that the fog created the opportunity; for we must remember that they were close to the lighthouse, and therefore, apart from the fog, easily within sight of it. For the same reason we may assume that the body was put overboard before the fog lifted. All these circumstances point to the body being close to the Rock, and the worm-tube emphatically confirms that inference."

"Then," said Philip, "in that case there is no great point in taking soundings."

"Not in the first instance," Thorndyke agreed. "But if we get no result close to the Rock, we may have to sample the bottom to see how far from the base the conditions indicated by the worm-tube extend."

They walked on in silence for some time. Presently Rodney remarked :

"This reminds me of the last time I came down to a rendezvous on Penzance pier, when I expected to find Varney waiting for me and he wasn't there. I wonder where he was, by the way."

"He had probably gone to post a letter to Mr. Penfield at some remote pillar-box, where collections were not too frequent," said Thorndyke.

Rodney looked at him quickly, once more astonished at his intimate knowledge of the details of the case. He was about to remark on it when Thorndyke asked :

"Have you seen much of Varney lately?"

"I haven't seen him at all," replied Rodney. "Have you, Phil?"

"No," replied Philip; "not for quite a long time. Which is rather odd, for he used to look in at Maggie's flat pretty often to have tea and show her his latest work. But he hasn't been there for weeks, I know, because I was speaking to her about him only a day or two ago. She seemed to have an idea that he might have gone away on a sketching tour, though I don't think she had anything to go on."

"He can't have smelt a rat and cleared out," mused Rodney. "I don't see how he could, though I shouldn't be altogether sorry if he had. It will be a horrid business when we have to charge him and give evidence against him. But it isn't possible that he can have seen or heard anything."

This was also Thorndyke's opinion, but he was

deeply interested in the report of Varney's disappearance. Nor was he entirely without a clue to it. His observations of Margaret and Varney suggested a possible explanation, which he did not think it necessary to refer to. And, in fact, the conversation was here interrupted by their arrival at the pier, where an elderly fisherman, who had been watching their approach, came forward and saluted them.

"Here you are then, skipper," said Philip; "Punctual to the minute. We've got a fine day for our trip, haven't we?"

"Ay, sir," replied the skipper; "'tis a wonderful calm day for the time of year. And glad I am to see it, if we are to work close into the Wolf, for it's a lumpy bit of water at the best of times around the Rock."

"Is everything ready?" asked Philip.

"Ay, sir. We are all ready to cast off this moment," and in confirmation he preceded the party to the head of the ladder, and indicated the craft lying alongside the pier beneath it—a small converted Penzance lugger with a large open cockpit, in the fore part of which was the engine.

The four men descended the ladder, and while the skipper and the second fisherman, who constituted the crew, were preparing to cast off the shore ropes, Philip took a last look round to see that all was in order. Then the crew, who was named Joe Tregenna, pushed off and started the engine, the skipper took the tiller, and the boat got under way.

"You see," said Philip, as the boat headed

out to sea, "we have got good strong tackle for the creeping operations."

He pointed over the boat's side to a long stout spar which was slung outside the bulwarks. It was secured by a chain bridle to a trawl-rope, and to it were attached a number of creepers—lengths of chain fitted with rows of hooks—which hung down into the water and trailed alongside. The equipment also included a spirit-compass, fitted with sight-vanes; a sextant; a hand-lead, which lay on the cockpit floor, with its line neatly coiled round it; and a deep-sea lead, stowed away forward with its long line and the block for lowering and hoisting it.

The occupants of the cockpit were strangely silent. It was a beautiful spring day, bright and sunny, with a warm blue sky overhead and a tranquil sea, heaving quietly to the long swell from the Atlantic, showing a sunlit sparkle on the surface and clear sapphire in the depths. "Nature painted all things gay," excepting the three men who sat on the side benches of the cockpit, whose countenances were expressive of the deepest gravity and even, in the case of the two Rodneys, of profound gloom.

"I shall be glad when this business is over," said Philip. "I feel as nervous as a cat."

"So do I," his brother agreed. "It is a gruesome affair. I find myself almost hoping that nothing will come of it. And yet that would only leave us worse off than ever."

"We mustn't be prepared to accept failure,"

said Thorndyke. "The thing is there, and we have got to find it; if not to-day, then to-morrow or some other day."

The two brothers looked at Thorndyke, a little daunted by his resolute attitude. "Yes, of course you are right," the elder admitted, "and it is only cowardice that makes me shrink from what we have to do. But when I think of what may come up, hanging from those creepers, I—bah! It is too horrible to think of! But I suppose it doesn't make that sort of impression on you? You don't find anything repulsive in the quest that we are engaged in?"

"No," Thorndyke admitted. "My attention is occupied by the scientific and legal interest of the search. But I can fully sympathize with your feelings on the matter. To you Purcell is a real person, whom you have known and talked with; to me he is a mere abstraction connected with a very curious and interesting case. The really unpleasant part of that case—to me—will come when we have completed our evidence, if we are so fortunate—I mean when we have to set the criminal law in motion."

"Yes," said Philip, "that will be perfectly beastly."

Once more silence fell upon the boat, broken only by the throb of the engine and the murmur of the water as it was cloven by the boat's stem. And meanwhile the distant coast slipped past until they were abreast of the Land's End, and far away to the south-west the solitary lighthouse rose on

the verge of the horizon. Soon afterwards they began to overtake the scattered members of a fleet of luggers, some with lowered mainsails and hand-lines down, others with their black sails set, heading for some distant fishing-ground. Through the midst of them the boat was threading her way, when her occupants suddenly became aware that one of the smaller luggers was steering so as to close in. Observing this, the skipper was putting over the helm to avoid her, when a seafaring voice from the little craft was heard to hail.

"Motor-boat ahoy! Gentleman aboard wants to speak to you!'

The two Rodneys looked at one another in surprise and then at the approaching lugger.

"Who the deuce can it be?" exclaimed Rodney. "But perhaps it is a stranger who wants a passage. If it is we shall have to refuse. We can't take anyone on board."

The boat slowed down, for at a word from the skipper Joe Tregenna had reversed the propeller. The lugger closed in rapidly, watched anxiously by the two Rodneys and Thorndyke. Suddenly a man appeared standing on the bulwark rail and holding on by the mast stay, while with his free hand he held a binocular to his eyes. Nearer and nearer the lugger approached, and still the two Rodneys gazed with growing anxiety at the figure on the bulwark. At length the man removed the glasses from his eyes and waved them above his head, and as his face became visible both brothers uttered a cry of amazement.

"God!" exclaimed Philip. "It's Varney! Sheer off, skipper! Don't let him come alongside."

But it was too late. The boat had lost way and failed to answer her helm. The lugger sheered in, sweeping abreast within a foot, and as she crept past Varney sprang lightly from her gunwale and dropped on the side bench beside Jack Rodney.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "this is a queer meeting. I couldn't believe my eyes when I first spotted you through the glasses. Motor-boat, too! Rather a come down, isn't it, for seasoned yachtsmen?"

He looked curiously at his hosts, evidently a little perplexed by their silence and their unresponsive bearing. The Rodneys were, in fact, stricken dumb with dismay, and even Thorndyke was for the moment disconcerted. The lugger which had brought Varney had already gone about and was standing out to sea, leaving to them the alternative of accepting this most unwelcome passenger or of pursuing the lugger and insisting on his returning on board of her. But the Rodneys were too paralyzed to do anything but gaze at Varney in silent consternation, and Thorndyke did not feel that his position on the boat entitled him to take any action. Indeed, no action seemed to be practicable.

"This is an odd show," said Varney, looking inquisitively about the boat. "What is the lay? You can't be going out to fish in this craft. And

you seem to be setting a course for the Scillies. What is it? Dredging? I see you've got a trawl-rope."

As the Rodneys were still almost stupefied by the horror of the situation, Thorndyke took upon himself to reply.

"The occasion of this little voyage was a rather remarkable marine worm that was sent to Professor D'Arcy, and which came from the locality to which we are bound. We are going to explore the bottom there."

Varney nodded. "You seem mighty keen on marine worms. I remember when I met you down here before you were in search of them, and so was Phil, though I don't fancy he got many. He had the bottles labelled ready for them, and that was about as far as he went. Do you remember that button you made, Phil, from the cork of one?"

"Yes," Philip replied huskily, "I remember."

During this conversation Thorndyke had been observing Varney with close attention, and he noted a very appreciable change in his appearance. He looked aged and worn, and there was in his expression a weariness and dejection that seemed to confirm certain opinions that Thorndyke had formed as to the reasons for his sudden disappearance from surroundings which had certainly not been without their attractions to him. And, not for the first time, a feeling of compunction and of some distaste for this quest contended with the professional interest and the sense of duty that

had been the impelling force behind the long, patient investigation.

Philip's curt reply was followed by a rather long, uncomfortable silence. Varney, quick and sensitive by nature, perceived that there was something amiss, that in some way his presence was a source of embarrassment. He sat on the side bench by Jack Rodney, gazing with a far-away look over the sea towards the Longships, wishing that he had stayed on board the lugger or that there were some means of escaping from this glum and silent company. And as he meditated he brought forth from his pocket his tobacco-pouch and cigarette-book, and half unconsciously, with a dexterity born of long practice, rolled a cigarette, all unaware that three pairs of eyes were riveted on his strangely efficient maimed finger, that three minds were conjuring up the vivid picture of a blue handprint on a white sail.

When he had lit the cigarette, Varney once more looked about the boat, and again his eye lighted on the big coil of trawl-rope, with its end passed out through a fair-lead. He rose, and, crossing the cockpit, looked over the side.

"Why," he exclaimed, "you've got a set of creepers! I thought you were going dredging. You won't pick up much with creepers, will you?"

"They will pick up anything with weeds attached to it," said Thorndyke.

Varney went back to his seat with a thoughtful, somewhat puzzled expression. He smoked in silence for a minute or two, and then suddenly asked:

"Where is the place that you are going to explore for these worms?"

"Professor D'Arcy's specimen," replied Thorndyke, "came from the neighbourhood of the Wolf Rock. That is where we are going to work."

Varney made no comment on this answer. He looked long and steadily at Thorndyke; then he turned away his head, and once more gazed out to sea. Evidently he was thinking hard, and his companions, who watched him furtively, could have little doubt as to the trend of his thoughts. Gradually, as the nature of the exploration dawned on him, his manner changed more and more. A horrible pallor overspread his face, and a terrible restlessness took possession of him. He smoked furiously cigarette after cigarette. He brought various articles out of his pockets, fidgeted with them awhile, and put them back. He picked up the hand-lead, looking at its arming, ran the line through his fingers, and made fancy knots on the bight. And ever and anon his glance strayed to the tall lighthouse, standing out of the sea with its red and white ringed tower, and drawing inexorably nearer and nearer.

So the voyage went on until the boat was within half a mile of the Rock, when Philip, having caught a glance and a nod from Thorndyke, gave the order to stop the engine and lower the creepers. The spar was cast loose and dropped into the water with a heavy splash, the trawl-rope ran out through the fair-lead, and meanwhile Jack Rodney took a pair of cross-bearings on the lighthouse and a point

of the distant land. Then the engine was re-started, the boat moved forward at half-speed, and the search began.

It was an intensely disagreeable experience for all excepting the puzzled but discreet skipper and the unconscious Joe. Varney, pale, haggard, and wild in aspect, fidgeted about the boat, now silent and moody, now making miserable efforts to appear interested or unconcerned, picking up and handling loose objects or portions of the gear, but constantly returning to the hand-lead, counting up the "marks" on the line, or making and pulling out various knots with his restless but curiously skilful fingers. And as his mood changed, Thorndyke watched him furtively, as if to judge by his manner how near they were to the object of the search.

It was a long and wearisome quest. Slowly the boat plied up and down on the eastern side of the Rock, gradually approaching it nearer and nearer at each return. From time to time the creepers caught on the rocky bottom, and had to be eased off; from time to time the dripping trawl-rope was hauled in and the creepers brought to the surface, offering to the anxious eyes that peered over the side nothing on the hooks but, perchance, a wisp of Zostera or a clinging spider-crab.

Calm as the day was and quiet as was the ocean, stirred only by the slumberous echoes of the great Atlantic swell, the sea was breaking heavily over the Rock; and as the boat closed in nearer and nearer, the water around boiled and eddied

in an unpleasant and even dangerous manner. The lighthouse keepers, who had for some time past been watching from the gallery the movements of the boat, now began to make warning signs, and one of them bellowed through a megaphone to the searchers to keep farther away.

"What do you say?" Rodney asked in a low voice. "We can't go any nearer? We shall be swamped or stove in? Shall we try another side?"

"Better try one more cast this side," said Thorndyke; and he spoke so definitely that all the others, including Varney, looked at him curiously. But no one answered, and as the skipper made no demur the creepers were dropped for a fresh cast still nearer the Rock. The boat was then to the north of the lighthouse, and the course set was to the south, so as to pass the Rock again on the east side. As they approached, the man with the megaphone bawled out fresh warnings and continued to roar at them and flourish his arm until they were abreast of the Rock in a wild tumble of confused waves. At this moment, Philip, who had his hand on the trawl-rope between the bollard and the fair-lead, reported that he had felt a pull, but that it seemed as if the creepers had broken away. As soon, therefore, as the boat was clear of the backwash and in comparatively smooth water, the order was passed to haul in the trawl-rope and examine the creepers.

The two Rodneys looked over the side eagerly but fearfully, for both had noticed something new —a definite expectancy—in Thorndyke's manner.

Varney, too, who had hitherto taken but little notice of the creepers, now knelt on the sidebench, gazing earnestly into the clear water whence the trawl-rope was rising. And still he toyed with the hand-lead, and absently made clove-hitches on the line and slipped them over his arm.

At length the spar came into view, and below it, on one of the creepers, a yellowish object, dimly visible through the wavering water.

"There's somethin' on this time," said the skipper, craning over the side and steadying himself by the tiller, which he still held. All eyes were riveted on the half-seen yellowish shape, moving up and down to the rise and fall of the boat. Apart from the others, Varney knelt on the bench, not fidgeting now, but still, rigid, pale as wax, staring with dreadful fascination at the slowly rising object. Suddenly the skipper uttered an exclamation.

"Why, 'tis a sou'wester! And all laced about wi' spun-y'n! Surely 'tis—— Steady, sir; you'll be overboard! My God!"

The others looked round quickly, and even as they looked Varney fell, with a heavy splash, into the water alongside. There was a tumultuous rush to the place whence he had fallen, and arms were thrust into the water in vain efforts to grasp the sinking figure. Rodney darted forward for the boat-hook, but by the time he was back with it the doomed man was far out of reach; yet for a long time, as it seemed, the horror-stricken onlookers could see him through the clear, blue-green water, sinking, sinking, growing paler, more shadowy,

more shapeless, but always steadily following the lead sinker, until at last he faded from their sight into the darkness of the ocean.

Not until some time after he had vanished did they haul on board the creeper with its dreadful burden. Indeed, that burden, in its entirety, was never hauled on board. As it reached the surface, Tregenna stopped hauling and held the rope steady ; and for a sensible time all eyes were fixed upon a skull, with a great jagged hole above the brows, that looked up at them beneath the peak of the sou'wester, through the web of spun-yarn, like the face of some phantom warrior looking out through the bars of his helmet. Then as Philip, reaching out an unsteady hand, unhooked the sou'wester from the creeper, the encircling coils of spun-yarn slipped, and the skull dropped into the water. Still the fascinated eyes watched it as it sank, turning slowly over and over, and seeming to cast back glances of horrid valediction ; watched it grow green and pallid and small, until it vanished into the darkness, even as Varney had vanished.

When it was quite invisible, Philip turned, and, flinging the hat down on the floor of the cockpit, sank on the bench with a groan. Thorndyke picked up the hat and unwound the spun-yarn.

"Do you identify it?" he asked ; and then, as he turned it over, he added : "But I see it identifies itself."

He held it towards Rodney, who was able to read in embroidered lettering on the silk lining "Dan Purcell."

Rodney nodded. "Yes," he said, "but, of course, there was no doubt. Is it necessary for us to do anything more?" He indicated the creepers with a gesture of weariness and disgust.

"No," replied Thorndyke. "We have seen the body and can swear to its identity, and I can certify as to the cause of death. We can produce this hat, with a bullet-hole, as I perceive, in the back, corresponding to the injury that we observed in the skull. I can also certify as to the death of Varney, and can furnish a sworn declaration of the facts that are within my knowledge. That may possibly be accepted by the authorities, having regard to the circumstances, as rendering any further inquiry unnecessary. But that is no concern of ours. We have established the fact that Daniel Purcell is dead, and our task is accomplished."

"Yes," said Rodney, "our quest has been successful beyond my expectations. But it has been an awful experience. I can't get the thought of poor Varney out of my mind."

"Nor I," said Philip. "And yet it was the best that could have happened. And there is a certain congruity in it, too. They are down there together. They had been companions, in a way, friends, the best part of their lives, and in death they are not divided."

THE END